

The Portrayal of Subalternity in the Work of Elena Poniatowska, Silvia Molina, and Rosa Nissán

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Abstract

The present thesis draws on postcolonial theory to analyze a selection of narratives written by Elena Poniatowska (b. 1932), and two of her former students, Silvia Molina (b. 1946) and Rosa Nissán (b. 1939). More specifically, this study has taken several different components of the theory related to Latin American Subaltern Studies and applied them to the work of these three authors. This has been done with the two-fold purpose of creating test cases that strive to interrogate several tenets linked to Subaltern theory as well as utilizing these ideas, and others closely related to them, to elucidate the texts in question. Using the insights provided by Gayatri Spivak's essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', this thesis carefully examines the portrayal of the subaltern within each of the narratives examined, focusing above all on the inclusion or exclusion of the marginal voice therein. In particular this thesis analyzes the portrayal of subaltern groups, such as those marginalized as a result of disability or religious preference, a field not often covered in Latin American Subaltern Studies. This thesis also provides a short history and study of the writer's workshop named 'El grupo' that brought these three writers together. The origins and achievements of this institution, unofficially known as 'El taller de Elena Poniatowska', are traced, and several of the principles that the students learned from the workshop are identified. Chapter three evaluates the narratives created by 'the mentor' Poniatowska: *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, and *Gaby Brimmer*, the fourth chapter examines 'Mentira piadosa', *El amor que me juraste*, and *Ascensión Tun* by Silvia Molina, and the final chapter considers the first two novels published by Rosa Nissán, *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*. Though these three

authors do share some common themes and tendencies, distinct conclusions are drawn with regard to each writer in question.

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Preface

Though they have existed since well before the 1950s, during recent decades the literary workshop has flourished in Mexico, producing many hundreds of the new writers who are constantly joining the Mexican literary scene.¹ None the less, little is known about these instructional institutions, what they do, how they function, what teachings are imparted, or who can participate. One of the objectives of this thesis is to refine our knowledge of Mexico's contemporary literary history by supplying details as to the structure, proceedings, and teaching that have assisted in shaping what is informally known as 'el taller de Elena Poniatowska'.

As Elena Poniatowska is a writer who has published a great number of her important works of literature on the marginal members of society in Mexico, this thesis proposes to study a selection of her works and two of her students from the aforementioned literary workshop who have composed narratives that tend to follow that vein: Silvia Molina and Rosa Nissán. The bulk of this study will then dedicate itself to the study of their work and various of the projections of subalternity that are encompassed within their writings. Three separate case studies will cover each individual author.

Inevitably, when employing theory related to Subaltern Studies one is obliged to consider the important question posed in 1988 by Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. However, in addition to analyzing all of the works in question with respect to Spivak's methodology and indicating possible solutions to this hermeneutic dilemma, this

thesis also analyzes the different manners in which the subaltern is represented within the works portrayed in the thesis. Finally, the present study attempts to illuminate these three writer's texts with recourse to Subaltern Studies and theories linked to this field.

In essence, this thesis attempts to supplement the use of both primary and secondary published sources with information derived from various interviews. In these interviews the three writers concerned have offered opinions and observations about their own work, that of their teachers and classmates, as well as their participation in Poniatowska's literary workshop. Insight into the functioning of the 'taller' of today was also gleaned from first-hand research carried out in Mexico in the summer of 2002.

¹ One noteworthy literary workshop that has existed in Mexico City in contemporary times is *El Centro Mexicano de Escritores*. For many years important writers such as Juan Rulfo have had direct disciples during the time they were teaching creative writing in this institution (Martínez and Domínguez 1995, 212).

Chapter One: Theoretical Considerations

With the publication of *Subaltern Studies: Writings on Indian History and Society* in 1982, the historian Ranajit Guha proposed a new focus on the way in which South East Asian History should be studied. This new discipline was described as beginning as a critique of two contending schools of history: the nationalist historians and the Cambridge School. Guha declared that these two methodologies were élitist: ‘They wrote up the history of nationalism as the story of an achievement by the élite class, whether Indian or British’ (Chakrabarty 2000, 471). Guha’s preliminary tenets were quite simple. He desired there to be additional, ‘anti-élitist’, emphasis on the social classes normally left aside by previous historians. His founding statement for this subject outlined his recommendations clearly:

There are several versions of this [élitist history] historiography, which differ from each other in the degree of their emphasis on the role of individual leaders or élite organizations and institutions as the main or motivating force in this venture. However, the modality common to them all is to uphold Indian nationalism as a phenomenal expression of the goodness of the native élite [...] The history of Indian nationalism is thus written up as a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian élite. [...] What, however, historical writing of this kind cannot do is to explain Indian nationalism for us. For it fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the

contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is, *independently of the élite* to the making and development of this nationalism. In this particular respect the poverty of this historiography is demonstrated beyond doubt by its failure to understand and assess the mass articulation of this nationalism except, negatively, as a law and order problem, and positively, if at all, either as a response to the charisma of certain élite leaders or in the currently more fashionable terms of vertical mobilization by the manipulation of factions. (Guha 1996, 2-3 *italics in original*)

Though not the first to have explored this approach to history,¹ Guha's propositions soon created a field of study named Subaltern Studies. The word 'subaltern' itself along with the established concept of 'hegemony' was taken by Guha from the writings of Antonio Gramsci, a communist intellectual who wrote most of his work in the 1920s and 1930s. Guha described much of historiography as a phenomenon whose tight focus on the élite had excluded from analysis many of the other classes, namely the subaltern. However, he also noted that this group forms a significant part of any nation and did have a legitimate role to play in history, though it may be distinct from that of the upper classes. His own words of introduction from a later edition in the subaltern series are emphasized: 'We are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography [...] for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project' (Guha 1984, vii). Guha further proposed that, in order to have a more complete view of any history, the inclusion of a study of the subaltern was necessary.

Apart from his original proposal in which he specifically identified the lack of research on the subaltern, it appeared that Guha sought to encourage as much work as possible on this often ignored subject. He did not, at that moment, form any rigid guidelines as to what should or should not become involved in this discipline. Much to the contrary, he stated:

There is no one given way of investigating this problematic. Let a hundred flowers blossom and we don't mind even the weeds. [...] They [those who use élitism in modern Indian historiography] may not all subscribe to what has been said above on this subject in exactly the way in which we have said it. However, we have no doubt that many other historiographical points of view and practices are likely to converge close to where we stand. Our purpose in making our views known is to promote such convergence. (Guha 1996, 7)

Since this statement, many proverbial flowers have sprung up from many different academics in several distinct fields of study. The discussion on the subaltern has also spread from the Indian Sub-continent to other areas of the world, such as Latin America. Publications on this subject have appeared in many different history and social science journals, demonstrating its penetration into those fields.²

However the arrival of this new discipline in the world of academia has not been without contention. A few years after the foundation of this new field, one of the original founding members of the Subaltern Studies group, Gayatri Spivak, published a now well

known essay entitled 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. This article has caused many to review the basic tenets of this discipline. Spivak stated her belief that it was impossible for the subaltern to speak due to the present structure and domination of western discourse. Her argument strictly defined subalternity with terms of representation:

For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual. (Spivak 1988, 285)

Spivak makes some important points in her essay. Firstly, in her view, in order to be a 'true' example of subalternity, the subaltern must be unknowable. His or her identity has to be linked to difference. Secondly, in order to be a 'true' subaltern the trajectory of this individual's existence has to be unremarkable to an intellectual. However, it is important to underline that, in this quote, Spivak has made some concessions to those interested in studying the subaltern. Her insistence that: 'the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation', appears to hint at two points for consideration. One, that she does acknowledge that the subaltern does have a voice in the sense that s/he is physically capable of speech. Two, her comment that the intellectual should not 'abstain from representation' appears to suggest that she is of the belief there is value in attempting to represent the subaltern. However, in the concluding remarks of her essay, Spivak appears to confirm that, in her estimation, the subaltern is an elusive figure who is so deeply

located within the margins of society that any chance for representation becomes impossible: 'The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with "woman" as a pious item. Representation has not withered away' (Spivak 1988, 308). It could be argued that, from this standpoint, one of the conditions of being subaltern is the impossibility of being represented. This is because, according to Spivak's definition of the subaltern, if this individual is able to codify his/her thoughts, feelings, or experiences in such a way as to be able to represent him/herself or allow him/herself to be represented, then he has become sufficiently 'institutionalized' to have departed from the subaltern category.

In this particular argument, Spivak created what could be considered an inescapable cycle of negation with regards to subaltern representation. If one accepts this cycle, the subaltern is never able to speak because, if s/he does, his/her is either distorted by a non-subaltern or by a former subaltern who has become 'institutionalized'. According to Spivak, in our present system of representation the subaltern does **not** speak. Thus, using modern-day representation to capture and or hear the subaltern voice becomes like catching a rainbow. One moves closer, only to find that the array of colors is constantly beyond one's grasp. If this observation with respect to the subaltern is true then the field of Subaltern Studies loses much of its validity and utility because we would constantly be searching for and writing about an unattainable subject. However, if this hypothesis can be disproved, if only partially, then this subject becomes worthy of our attention because this would mean that it would be possible to glean information about the subaltern from texts that claim to represent these individuals.

The way in which Spivak has linked the subaltern to representation also creates difficult dilemmas for anyone who wishes to represent him/her. In her definition of a 'true' subaltern, she seems to have gone further than others. It is true that Guha explained that, in defining the subaltern, one must sift through: '[...] an ambiguity which it is up to the historian to sort out on the basis of a close and judicious reading of his evidence' (Guha 1982, 8). Nonetheless, the lines he drew simply seem to be interested in differentiating between the *élite* and 'the people'.³ Spivak, on the other hand, appears to equate the exact essence of the subaltern with the unknowable. So in one sense, speaking about the subaltern could be greatly simplified by speaking about this group using Guha's original intentions instead of the terms Spivak employed in her rebuttal-essay.

Furthermore, there are those who, while applauding the healthy dose of skepticism Spivak has brought to Subaltern Studies, have identified ways in which her double-bind on both the subaltern and those whose wish to speak for (represent) them can be broken. One person who has done so is Bart Moore-Gilbert. He has identified what he called one of the key incongruities in Spivak's own work:

Perhaps the most striking of these [contradictions] is that insofar as Spivak asserts that the subaltern cannot speak, she is, of course, herself constituting and speaking for, or in place of, the subaltern – the very maneuver for which she criticizes so much western discourse. Indeed, possibly the greatest irony of an essay like 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' is that, if its account of subaltern alterity and muteness were true, then there

would be nothing but the West (and the native élite, perhaps) to write about. (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 464)

As this writer has made clear, Spivak violates her own declaration about the subaltern groups not being able to speak by her own representation of them. She herself becomes caught up in her own double bind, so to speak. Moreover, Moore-Gilbert states that, if it were impossible to know anything about subaltern groups in the same manner as suggested in Spivak's essay, then no texts would appear on them at all.⁴ Moore-Gilbert's statement becomes extremely valuable to this present study precisely because he is effectively able to break through this closed cycle of representation and open it up to the possibility of a dialogue with regards to texts which allow the subaltern to speak.

Another academic who, while acknowledging some of Spivak's principles and views on the Subaltern, has challenged Spivak's notion that it is impossible to represent the subaltern is John Beverley. Beverley was introduced to Subaltern Studies by Spivak herself, and has become one of the most important figures with regards to this discipline and Latin American Studies – an area of study where Subaltern Studies has found many applications and subscribers. He is one of the original members of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group and helped to create its founding statement which, standing on the shoulders of South Asian scholars led by Guha, proposed, amongst other initiatives, to: '[...] represent subalternity in Latin America, in whatever form it takes wherever it appears – nation, hacienda, work place, home, informal sector, black market – to find the blank space where it speaks [...]' (Latin American Subaltern Studies Group 1993, 119). Similar to the founding statement Guha published in the first edition of *Subaltern Studies*

I: Writing South Asian History and Society, this document put forward some of the basic reasons for which this specific group was founded as well as making a call to other intellectuals to concentrate their efforts on this field.⁵

Notwithstanding the enthusiasm that can be observed in the field of academics who have used postcolonial theory in a Latin American context, there have been those who have criticized this practice as well. Some believe that it is inappropriate to apply a theory that has originated in a geographic region distinct from Latin America. Jorge Klor de Alva is one of those who shares this view. In his essay ‘Colonialism and Postcolonialism as (Latin) American Mirages’, for example, Klor de Alva is quick to point out that: ‘In short, the Americas were neither Asia nor Africa; Mexico is not India. Peru is not Indonesia, and Latinos in the U. S. - although tragically opposed by an exclusionary will - are not Algerians’ (Klor de Alva 1992, 3). Klor de Alva’s main argument centers around the idea that (Latin) America has had a different history to South Asia and Africa and for that reason it is inappropriate to say that (Latin) America is made up of postcolonial nations, thus arguing that a postcolonial theoretical framework is not applicable to this specific part of the world. Although Klor de Alva makes many valid points in his argument, he does not address one of the basic principles of subaltern studies, which validates the present study. This principle is simply that one of the main intentions of subaltern studies is to study what Guha calls: ‘the politics of the people’ (Guha 1996, 4). Guha’s interest is in looking at the parts of society, specifically the subaltern, which have been left out by historians and others. With this notion in consideration - the idea that subaltern studies brings to the foreground those who were previously excluded from academic studies - it is possible to apply that basic principle of

subaltern studies to almost any country in the world without needing to consider if the nation in question is postcolonial or not. Hence, the application of Subaltern Studies to Latin American contexts is possible because every nation has members who are subalterns.

Beverley's views are more nuanced. He, at first glance, appears to agree with Spivak's ideas that: 'we cannot simply disavow representation under the pretext that we are allowing the subaltern to "speak for itself"' (Beverley 1999, 39). None the less, he has made a case for studying what the subaltern subject 'says' by arguing that it is true that the subaltern may use academics or élitists in order to 'speak', and he clearly recognized the possible imperfections of the voice academics may project in their studies. For that same reason, Beverley did not claim to speak on their behalf in a literal sense: '[...] we do not claim to represent ("cognitively map", "let speak", "speak for", "excavate") the subaltern' (Beverley 1999, 40). At the same time, none the less, in his justification for studying the subaltern he claimed:

We can approximate in our work, personal relations, and political practice closer and closer to the world of the subaltern, but we can never actually merge with it, even if, in the fashion of the narodniki, we were to 'go to the people'. (Beverley 1999, 40)

Beverley views Subaltern Studies as the means whereby it is possible to achieve a closer approximation to the subaltern, even if it were to be done, as it were, 'imperfectly'. He recognizes that what is being seen may not be the actual voice of the subaltern but rather

an approximation to it. Beverley identifies the value of this ‘getting closer and closer’ to the subaltern:

Subaltern studies registers rather how the knowledge we construct and impart as academics is structured by the absence, difficulty, or impossibility of representation of the subaltern. This is to recognize, however, the fundamental inadequacy of that knowledge and of the institutions that contain it, and therefore the need for a radical change in the direction of a more democratic and non-hierarchical social order.
(Beverley 1999, 40)

Beverley states that the imperfections within the study of the subaltern are one of the elements that make it important because they call for: ‘a radical change in the direction of a more democratic and non-hierarchical social order’ (Beverley 1999, 40). The factors that make the academic’s study of the subaltern imperfect are also the ones that call for social change. It is in this sense that Beverley has responded to Spivak’s insistence that those who attempt to allow the subaltern to speak should not desist in doing so. It is in this spirit that he does not ‘abstain from representation’ – to use Spivak’s words - with respect to the subaltern.

One might consider Beverley’s answer to Spivak’s question, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ to be, in effect, his entire book-length study on Subaltern Studies in Latin America, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (1999). This is because it focused on several different texts and situations in which he viewed

subalternity to be manifested in Latin America. Beverley embraced several different themes in his study: hybridity, nation and state, subaltern consciousness, and subaltern agency, amongst others. However, one of the subjects he centered on specifically was that of the testimonial genre in Latin America. In his work, Beverley implied that one of the examples of a text that allows the subaltern to speak is that of the 'testimonio'. A significant part of his literary critique involved analysis of, or discussion on, issues related to one of the most famous contemporary 'testimonios' in Hispano America: that of Rigoberta Menchú. Beverley did not seem to question whether or not Menchú 'spoke' in her 'testimonio'. Amongst other issues, Beverley was interested in the way in which Rigoberta Menchú was seen by scholars and why so many people used her first name. His principal concerns had more to do with what her discourse (and other subaltern representation) can teach those concerning themselves with this field of study and the information that can be gleaned with regard to subaltern agency. Finally, *Subalternity and Representation* identified several important questions with regard to subaltern agency and what kind of effects this can have on a text that attempts to allow the subaltern to speak.

In his analysis of 'testimonio', Beverley made reference to one of the foremost experts of this field in Latin America, Elzbieta Sklodowska, and it is now to the work of this critic that I wish to turn. In her most detailed work on this subject, *Testimonio hispano-americano: historia, teoría, poética* (1992), she traced the origins of this genre as well as analyzing it in a theoretical context.⁶ In addition to theory, Sklodowska provided a good definition of the two main types of testimony. The first 'testimonio' Sklodowska identified was much more scientific in nature, an example being a classic piece of anthropological work on Latin America, Oscar Lewis' *The Children of Sánchez*

(1961). A description of this text's construction offered a clear idea of what kind of document it is: 'La grabadora determina su método, convirtiéndose en garantía incuestionable de autenticidad, en un recurso, valga la expresión, de "alta fidelidad"' (Skłodowska 1992, 39). Skłodowska defined this type of 'testimonio' by its documentary nature. Lewis, in the introduction of *The Children of Sánchez*, explained the role of the tape recorder in his investigative process: 'The tape recorder, used in taking down the life-stories in this book, has made possible the beginning of a new type of literature of social realism. [...] For those of my colleagues who are interested in the raw materials, I have the taped interviews available' (Lewis 1961, xii). This type of 'testimonio' was based on the technique of high fidelity, its aim being to achieve an advanced level of social realism.

The other class of 'testimonio' Skłodowska outlines is more artistic in nature. Many of the same tools are used (i.e.: tape recorder) in order to obtain 'la materia prima' but the method of presentation is quite different. Skłodowska pointed to Miguel Barnet's testimonial novel *Cimarrón: historia de un esclavo* (1967) as an example of this second type of 'testimonio':

Según Barnet, para captar la oralidad del lenguaje es necesaria la grabadora 'que lo escucha todo, que lo percibe todo y que es además el oído imparcial por excelencia'. Pero la grabación es para Barnet solamente un punto de arranque para el trabajo testimonial, que es esencialmente creativo y que consiste en *decantar* el discurso original y no *transcribirlo*: 'Yo jamás escribiría ningún libro reproduciendo fidedignamente lo que la

grabadora me dicte. De la grabadora tomaría el tono del lenguaje y la anécdota, lo demás, el estilo y los matices, serían mi contribución.’

(Sklodowska 1992, 40)

Barnet considered his own creative contribution to the ‘testimonio’ to be the aspect that draws the reader in:

Pero si tú no eres artista, entonces te pasa como a Oscar Lewis que ha escrito un libro como *La vida*, que es un ladrillo que nadie lee, porque aunque aporta desde el punto de vista del lenguaje y, quizá, de la psicología, es tremendamente aburrido. Yo quiero que una obra tenga siempre esa cosa humana, ese elemento humano. (Sklodowska 1992, 40)

It is clear that Barnet was aware of the other scientific, sociological model advanced by Lewis; but he chose to fictionalize his research in order to make his informant’s story more appealing to the reader. However, by utilizing this methodology one could point to Spivak’s argument and allege that this author has made use of the subaltern to create a personal discourse. The main ideas of Spivak’s essay, which question the authenticity of authorship, were clearly in evidence in Sklodowska’s study. The main points Sklodowska raised were: whose voice is the reader receiving when s/he reads a testimonial novel? Is it the author’s? Or is it the individual who claimed to be sharing his testimony? She questioned the relationship between interviewer and interviewee that exists between author and subject in cases such as Miguel Barnet and Esteban Montejo or Elizabeth

Burgos-Debray and Rigoberta Menchú. Sklodowska made several different inquiries of these types of associations: ‘En qué consiste la supesta originalidad del testimonio? ¿Cómo se va configurando aquí la autoridad de la enunciación?’ (Sklodowska 1991, 122). However, notwithstanding her skepticism with regard to who is speaking in testimonial documents, Sklodowska did view this genre as one that contained historical truths⁷ as she suggested: ‘The testimonial nonfiction novel, in other words, enacts the epistemological belief that in an extreme situation the only authentic way to deal with outside phenomena is to report them as they register themselves on one’s participating senses’ (Zavarzadeh 1979, 128). This quote lends weight to one of the main ideas explored in this thesis, namely that, though Latin American ‘testimonio’ might contain fiction mixed with factual information, it is an authentic way in which actual facts can be recorded according to the writer’s perception of events.

Another academic who readily accepts the imperfection of subaltern discourse without discounting its importance is Doris Sommer. In an essay on this subject she proposed trying not to fill in the voids that testimonial discourse can present, but rather to learn from those voids:

There is no good reason for filling in the distance that testimonials safeguard through secrets with either veiled theoretical disdain or sentimental identification. Instead, that distance can be read as a lesson in the condition of possibility for coalition politics. It is similar to learning that respect is the condition of possibility for the kind of love that takes care not to simply appropriate its object. (Gugelberger 1996, 157)

Sommer also viewed the imperfections of testimonial discourse as something to be taken into consideration when reading them; however, at the same time, she also stated that their shortcomings aided in making a call for social change and not as a means to discount the 'testimonio' in and of itself.

One of the writers Sklodowska focused on in her study of Hispanic American 'testimonio' is Elena Poniatowska (b. 1932). The narrative this author and her protégé have created can be considered unique in that they appear to combine elements typical of 'testimonio' in differing ways. Though Elena Poniatowska, and some of her former students, Silvia Molina (b. 1946) and Rosa Nissán (b. 1939), admit to elaborating original testimonies in a manner which appears to resemble Barnet's artistic enhancement of 'testimonio', at the same time Poniatowska, and her aforementioned students all appeal to fact in a way similar to the *modus operandi* employed by Oscar Lewis. The tension they create by so doing is favorable to them in so much as they 'play the two sides against the middle', as it were, in what could appear to be a bid to inoculate their texts from attacks with regard to their appeals to veracity. There is no question, indeed, that Poniatowska is one of the best representatives of 'testimonio' in Latin America. Her testimonial novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) is considered one of the key examples of 'testimonio' along with those books already mentioned: *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1967) by Miguel Barnet and *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1984) by Burgos-Debry. Poniatowska's first testimonial narrative was, indeed, the catalyst needed to launch her as an international writer. Modeled somewhat on Oscar Lewis'

anthropological work with the Mexican subaltern in the 1960's, this novel also identified her as an author who gives voice to those who do not have one (Mora 2001).⁸

Just as Elena Poniatowska learned skills and techniques from Lewis, others have been instructed by her on how to delve into the depths of Mexican society. Many of those individuals attended the writing classes Poniatowska conducted for over twenty years in the Mexican capital. The literary critic and academic Beth Jörgensen briefly mentions this workshop in her study *The Writing of Elena Poniatowska: Engaging Dialogues*:

Elena Poniatowska's great success as a writer has translated into opportunities to teach inside and outside Mexico. For many years now she has led a weekly writers' workshop in the suburb of Tlacopac. There she reads works-in-progress of the group's twenty-five or so participants, and she facilitates the discussion of their projects. A number of novels have been published by members of that workshop, including *La mañana debe seguir gris* by Silvia Molina and *Novia que te veas* [sic] by Rosa Nissán. (Jörgensen 1994, xv)

The two students mentioned in the quote above, Silvia Molina and Rosa Nissán, both published novels on the subaltern some years after being under Poniatowska's tutelage. However, this is not the only reason to study these three writers in the same thesis. The existence of the workshop suggests all three learned how to write in similar ways. Moreover, the fact that they have all lived during the same time period (they were all born within twelve years of each other) and in the same city (geographical region) makes

it even more appropriate to study them together in this thesis. For this reason, this thesis analyzes both the literary workshop itself in addition to key works from the tutor, Poniatowska, and her students Molina and Nissán. Since all of the narratives studied in this thesis deal with the subaltern to some degree, one of the driving questions behind this thesis will be to determine if, as Spivak posed, the subaltern is able to speak in the texts these writers have created, or if – by a subtle ventriloquist trick – we are simply hearing the bourgeois voice of the author. In order to achieve this purpose, in addition to studying the ‘taller’ itself, this thesis will look at the methods the different writers used to obtain their information on the subaltern subject in their narratives. Moreover, this study will explore the different ways Poniatowska, Molina, and Nissán have portrayed the subaltern in their novel and will propose some tentative answers with respect to how the representation of the subaltern subject can correlate with the level of contact the author has had with the subaltern world.

Often, academic studies that focus on the subaltern home in on certain groups, in particular the indigenous, the urban poor, and the provincial subject. It is frequently forgotten or ignored that the subaltern in Mexico and other cultures and societies is much larger and more varied. The analysis of these three authors and their works has also brought to light different types of subalterns who have possibly never been studied before in the context of Latin American Subaltern Studies. One of these is the Jewish Subaltern. Though they are important, these individuals represent a group in the Mexican Capital that is very meager in number. However, another example of the subaltern studied in this thesis is quite large in every country; that group is made up by those subalterns who are marginalized due to some physical or mental disability: the disabled subaltern. This type

of subaltern, which is one of the largest groups of all the marginal individuals in any given society, is also possibly one of the least popular in terms of study as well. This subalternizing factor is also potentially the most radical because physical or mental disabilities do not discriminate in terms of race, sex, religion, or social status.⁹ One element the present study strives to underscore is how the relatively new discipline of Disability Studies has been able to create new tools with which to analyze this specific type of subaltern through its desire: '[...] to relate disability to fundamental assumptions about humanity and personhood in different cultures' (Whyte 1995, 24) and to '[...] relate concepts of disability to notions about power and bodies, normality and order, individual capacity and social existence' (Whyte 1995, 24-25). Thus, these case studies also serve as a means to widen the spectrum that Latin American Subaltern Studies currently covers.

An analysis of the literary work of these three authors in particular assists the study of Latin American literature and subalternity due the argueably subaltern status women writers hold within the Mexican and the Hispanic-American literary canon. Gayatri Spivak draws our attention this phenomenon in her critique of subaltern (re)presentation: 'Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. [...] If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern female is even more deeply in shadow' (Spivak 1988, 286). Here Spivak refers to the 'double colonization' that patriarchy brings about when focusing on womanhood as subject. So, in one sense, to study the female author in Latin America (or elsewhere) is to study the marginalized and to emphasize the

concept of subalternization. Spivak, however, is not the only one to have presented this dilemma.

In *Plotting Women*, a book on the history of women and writing in Mexico, Jean Franco sets out ‘to discover those incandescent moments when different configurations of gender and knowledge are briefly illuminated’ (Franco 1989, xxii). When referring to women’s writing in Latin America alludes to isolation and loneliness and, in particular, the woman writer’s exclusion from the larger ‘debate’ of feminism (Franco 1989, xxii). In her analysis, Franco aligns the male with ‘the institution’ and the female with ‘marginality’ and underlines the ‘gulf between the longevity and power of institutions and the fragile life story of marginality’ (Franco 1989, xxiii). This is clearly emphasized at the close of *Plotting Women* when women’s writing is intimately linked to marginality. Franco paraphrases Elena Poniatowska: ‘At a congress on women’s writing, Elena Poniatowska declared that women’s literature is a part of the literature of the oppressed’ (Franco 1989, 187). Some ten years after the previously mentioned congress, Poniatowska again unmistakably reiterated what Franco had paraphrased in *Plotting Women*: ‘La literatura de las mujeres en América Latina es parte de la voz de los oprimidos. Lo creo tan profundamente que estoy dispuesta a convertirlo en *leit-motif*, en un ritornello, en ideología’ (Poniatowska 1993, 462). It would be difficult to find a more transparent statement with regards to the relationship between Latin American women writers and marginality, and whilst the present thesis sheds light on the labors of these authors, it too is a recognition of the forces that have previously excluded such writers from a more pivotal status in the Mexican literary canon.

The present thesis will develop along the following lines. Chapter two creates a backdrop as well as a springboard for this study. A brief, but detailed history of the ‘taller’ in which Elena Poniatowska taught both Rosa Nissán and Silvia Molina is provided. This particular institution’s trajectory is traced from its beginnings within the public sector in the 1970’s to the private-exclusivity of an upper-middle class neighborhood within which it has operated more recently. Both instructors as well as pupils are identified, in addition to many of the works, which have found their genesis within this literary workshop. After a thumb-nail history, this chapter then focuses on several of the techniques taught by Poniatowska during the time she spent as the group’s teacher and the impact these lessons had on Molina’s and Nissán’s work. The majority of this information was obtained through interviews conducted with Poniatowska herself and with Silvia Molina and Rosa Nissán. This chapter then concludes by reviewing the only collaborative piece of work produced by Poniatowska and her students, *Nada nadie: las voces del temblor* (1988), and analyzing this narrative as a text which puts into practice the ideology Poniatowska taught to her students as well as comparing it to other official records of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake.

Chapter three centers on Elena Poniatowska and her writing. After identifying and briefly discussing her links with the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, this chapter begins by comparing *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* with *Pedro Martínez: a Mexican Peasant and His Family* (1980). Aside from a character analysis, this section considers significant differences and similarities between the ways in which both books were created and their actual published presentation. This point in particular focuses on the essential differences

between the anthropological text created by Lewis and the ‘novela testimonial’ Poniatowska created.

The following section in chapter three considers *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* (1978). This novella draws on a historical text in order to recreate a series of letters the immigrant Angelina Beloff sent to her former lover and husband, Diego Rivera. The portrayal of this woman is evaluated. In addition, an argument is made which discusses the extent to which Elena Poniatowska has used historical documents in order to serve her own artistic purposes. The third and final part of this chapter considers one of Poniatowska’s most unique, but equally, one of her most forgotten texts: *Gaby Brimmer* (1979). This compact section analyzes this ‘testimonio’ within the relatively new context of Disability Studies as it relates to Subaltern Studies topics and, at the same time, it proposes that *Gaby Brimmer* can be read as a testimonial document which could be considered to be a part of ‘La Onda’ literary movement in Mexico.

Chapter four reviews two of the novels from one of Elena Poniatowska’s most prolific students, Silvia Molina. This section commences with an examination of Molina’s short story ‘Mentira piadosa’ (1993) which serves as a starting point and a tool of analysis for the next two narratives because it lays out in a concise manner several of the basic patterns this author’s fictions follow when approaching the subaltern. The analysis of *El amor que me juraste* (1999), makes use of theoretical questions posed by John Beverley and Néstor Canclini with respect to the hybrid. In this novel, the actual proportion the subaltern character occupies in comparison with characters of other classes is quite small. However, its representation along with an analysis of the proposed hybrid

narrator and protagonist serve as a good test-case with respect to the limits of hybridity and its ability to encapsulate, and/or speak for, the subaltern.

The third section of this chapter considers *Ascensión Tun* (1981). This book brings together a rather unique set of protagonists who all live, and or participate, in a Casa de Beneficiencia, a governmental institution created to provide support for the citizens of Campeche who cannot do so for themselves. This house embraces members of the community from many different sectors of society, but the main characters create a dichotomy of the two sides of power: hegemony and subalternity. The alternating manners in which these two sides are depicted is discussed and inferences are made with respect to the significance of these discrepancies and how they can be related to subaltern discourse.

The fifth and final chapter reviews the first two novels written by Rosa Nissán: *Novia que te vea* (1992) and *Hisho que te nazca* (1996). These two narratives differ from the rest of the other novels studied in this thesis insomuch as they are the only ones to contain subaltern characters who speak a language different from that of the mainstream society. For that same reason this thesis will consider the authenticity, in addition to the role, of the subaltern language encountered in this novel. Aside from a linguistic analysis, this chapter also studies the ideology these two narratives present with respect to the ability of the subaltern to ‘exit’ subalternity. This chapter also indicates some of the unique ways in which the subaltern Jewish community differs from others that have been examined in this thesis. However, perhaps one of the most unique characteristics of Rosa Nissán’s narratives is that they are highly autobiographical in nature. This situation allows for a discussion with respect to how Nissán’s use of fact and fiction actually

serves to inoculate her novels from attacks on its authenticity while still maintaining an appeal to an empirically verifiable reality. Thus, somewhat ironically, this final section will discuss how the veneer of fiction with which she overlays her narratives can arguably be said to be protecting the truth within her novels.

¹ '[Guha's approach] looked for an anti-élitist approach to history-writing and in this it had much in common with the "history from below" approaches pioneered in English historiography by Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson, E.J. Hobsbawn, and others' (Chakrabarty 2000, 471).

² Here are some brief examples of new applications of Subaltern Studies. 'Subaltern Studies in a U.S. Frame' focuses on applications of subaltern studies in the United States of America (Cherniavska 1996, 85-110). A foreign film critique uses Subaltern Studies to consider films produced by women in the Third World –Algeria in this case – (Khannous 2002, 41-61). 'Middle East Studies and Subaltern Studies' places Subaltern Studies in another geographical and cultural context (Webber 1997, 11-16). 'From In Equality to Difference: Colonial Contradictions of Class and Ethnicity in Socialist China' takes concepts from this new field and uses them to analyze yet another part of Asia (Bulag 2000, 331-61).

³ Guha defines the subaltern as: 'Taken as a whole and in the abstract this last category of the élite was heterogeneous in its composition and thanks to the uneven character of regional economic and social developments, differed from area to area. The same class or element which was dominant in one area according to the definition given above, could be among the dominated in another. This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances, especially among the lowest strata of the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants all of whom belonged, ideally speaking, to the category of "people" or "subaltern classes", as defined below. It is the task of research to investigate, identify and measure the specific nature and degree of the deviation of these elements from the ideal and situate it historically. The terms "people" and "subaltern classes" have been used as synonymous throughout this note. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'élite'. Some of these classes and groups such as the lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants who 'naturally' ranked among the 'people' and the 'subaltern', could under certain circumstances act for the 'élite', as explained above, and therefore be classified as such in some local or regional situations -- an ambiguity which it is up to the historian to sort out on the basis of a close and judicious reading of his evidence' (Guha 1982, 8).

⁴ It could be argued that Moore-Gilbert's interpretation is rather extreme at this point. We do, for example have literature which includes fairies and fire-breathing dragons, neither of which has really ever been proven to exist at all either.

⁵ For full details as to the content of this statement see the article 'Founding Statement' (Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, 1993).

⁶ Another significant text which offers more theoretical ideas with regards to testimony is Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). This study is frequently cited in Gugelberger's *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*.

⁷ Sklodowska has described the art of creating testimonial literature as 'el arte de verdades parciales' (1991, 122).

⁸ Though it is important to note that in this same article Poniatowska has refuted the idea that people do not have a voice. She stated that simply: 'puse una cauce para que se oiga' (Mora 2001).

⁹ In Mexico, a recent governmental proposition for Federal laws for the handicapped stated that those with disability represented 2.3 percent of Mexico's total population and reside in 10 percent of Mexico's homes (Gobierno Mexicano 2004).

Chapter Two: *'El taller de Elena Poniatowska'*

The literary works of the three authors considered in this thesis vary considerably. However, one of the ways in which Elena Poniatowska, Silvia Molina, and Rosa Nissán can be linked, - as mentioned previously - is through their participation in a literary workshop in Mexico City. These workshops have played an important role in the formation of new contemporary writers in Mexico – especially during Nissán's and Molina's generation, which was forming in the late seventies and early eighties: 'La generación de [Emiliano] Pérez Cruz [b.1955] accedió masivamente a los talleres literarios, que pasaron de la élite estilística a la institucionalización multitudinaria' (Martínez 1995, 256).¹ Nevertheless, even though the existence and importance of literary workshops have been previously noted by contemporary critics, little has been done to study closely the history of these workshops. The first part of this chapter focuses on the specific literary workshop that brought these three writers together (at least physically) and is based on, in its majority, first-hand fieldwork carried out in the Mexican capital.² The second part of this chapter analyzes Oscar Lewis' impact on the writing of the leading member of the group, Elena Poniatowska; and, in turn, some of the effects Poniatowska's workshop has had on her apprentice writers in question.

The present study of this specific writers' workshop analyzed in this chapter took place in June and July of 2002 and is a necessary first step allowing us to understand the physical mechanisms of the specific environment in question. During those summer months there were approximately twelve students who were regularly participating in the

classes. There were only two men (excluding the author and the instructor), one in his fifties and another who was twenty-one. The rest of the students were women between the ages of thirty and seventy, though the majority of the females in the class fell between the ages of thirty-five to forty-five. However, whereas in the first few years of the writer's workshop when there had been separate instructors for the literary part of the course and the literary creation section, in 2002, Carlos Olivares Baró taught both subjects. (Though it was not officially confirmed, it was suggested by one of the interviewees that this might be due to the economic constraints the workshop is currently experiencing.) At the time this study took place the workshop was analyzing García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967). Aside from this novel, the professor reviewed several poems he had personally selected. The class lasted three hours, two of which were dedicated to the teaching of literature. The students used the final hour to share their own texts, prepared specifically for the workshop.

The environment within the 'taller' was friendly and open, somewhat more so than would be common in a normal university classroom, yet nonetheless, there was enough seriousness to allow the students to accomplish a fair amount of work during their three-hour session. During the discussion of literature, professor Baró tended to speak much more than the students; but when time came to analyze the texts their fellow classmates had brought in, the rest of the participants spoke more freely. Evaluation of their peers' work was characterized by praise rather than by critique. It was Carlos Baró who suggested the majority of the alterations to be made. His recommendations concerned stylistic rather than thematic issues. On the other hand, the students offered few stylistic suggestions and tended to comment much more on theme. Aside from his

evaluation of individual students' work, Baró would also actively encourage the participants to bring their work to class. While the classmates were sharing their praise and evaluations of the texts, in general, the level of excitement in the writers' workshop rose considerably as opposed to the time spent studying literary classics. Though the majority of those who were interviewed in the course of the research on this literary workshop had not published a novel, all of them, without exception, considered themselves writers and were sure that at some point in the future they would be published authors. To gain some perspective on the present-day function of the 'taller', it is helpful to review its history and influence.

This particular writer's workshop, whose official name is known as 'El grupo' (though it is unofficially called 'El taller de Elena Poniatowska'), came into being on 12 July, 1972. It was founded by the Mexican author Alicia Trueba within the Instituto Kairos in Mexico City. Since that time 'El grupo' has moved from El Instituto Kairos, to the offices of the Mexican newspaper *Unomásuno*, and from there it has relocated itself to Alicia Trueba's home on #76 Reforma in Colonia San Ángel in the Mexican capital where it has been now for several years.³ Alicia Trueba, who is the only member who is known to have been with the group from its beginnings to the present-day, designed her home in such a way so that the ground floor of her spacious residence could accommodate the proceedings of a large literary workshop and thus grant an independent space for the class to meet freely.

There have been several teachers who have directed 'El grupo'. In the summer of 2002, and as already mentioned, the current leader/principal teacher of the workshop was Carlos Olivares Baró, a Cuban (though he has resided in Mexico for over a decade and is

said to be a naturalized Mexican citizen). However, there have been many instructors who have helped to educate the students of 'El grupo': José Agustín, Hugo Hiriart, María Inés García Canales, and Sandra Cohen are among those who have taught the workshop in the past. Nonetheless, to this day, the teacher who has taught the class for the longest period of time and who appears to have had the greatest impact on the students generally is Elena Poniatowska. She taught for twenty-five of the thirty-two years the workshop has been in existence and it was not until approximately seven years ago that she left 'El grupo' definitively.⁴

When the literary workshop was formed in 1972, its original founding members were Alicia Trueba, Adela Celorio, Gloria Innes, Beatriz Graf, Magda Solís, Olga de Juambelz, Yolanda Domínguez and Carmen Carrara. Other women such as Marie Pierre Colle Corcuera, Rosa Nissán, Marisol Martín del Campo, y Guadalupe Loeza and Silvia Molina subsequently began attending the classes. The members of 'El grupo' have changed with time, some arrive while others move on, but there do appear to be some general characteristics of its members that can be mentioned. Since the class meets from 10:30am to 2:30pm every Thursday, the greater part of those who make up the workshop are women, most of whom are housewives from upper-middle-class and upper-class homes in Mexico City. Because this particular literary workshop does not publicly solicit members, those who have become a part of it have done so due to 'azares del destino' (a term used by the workshop's youngest member, Rodrigo Ávila), private invitation, or word of mouth. Ávila claims that, in theory, anyone can become a member of 'El grupo'; but that not everyone does due to the fact that the classes are not free, nor particularly inexpensive. The student wishing to attend is required to pay one hundred Mexican pesos

per class or three hundred pesos per month (there are typically four classes per month). These funds (directly paid to the class treasurer) are used to pay the current teacher as well as to finance the publication of the workshop's internal literary magazine *Palabraísmos*, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. At present, any kind of grant or scholarship scheme for those who would like to attend but cannot pay does not appear to exist. So, with a few exceptions, 'El grupo' was, at the time of this study, a homogenous group of well-to-do women from Mexico City between the ages of 30 and 60 who share a passion for literature and literary creation and who have the economic means, and a sufficiently flexible schedule to allow them to take part in the classes.

As mentioned in the last paragraph, for the majority of the last thirty years the workshop has been held every Thursday from 10:30 in the morning to 2:30 in the afternoon. These four hours of class time are divided into two sections. The first two hours are used to study classic works of literature, which could be Peninsular or Latin American, contemporary or medieval, novel or poetry, all depending on the focus of the professor at the time, and - to a lesser degree - on the likes and dislikes of the students. Homework is assigned and the students are expected to have studied the texts in question and to come ready to participate in a class discussion on the literary topic under consideration. Clearly referring to the literary study of the workshop, Alicia Trueba, one of 'El grupo's' founders, is reported to have said: 'Si el taller no hace buenos escritores, hace muy buenos lectores' (IRA).⁵ Aside from their reading assignments, the participants in the workshop are also encouraged to bring along copies of their own work in progress. In this realm there is much more freedom and, although the workshop started out

specifically as a short story workshop, the students bring poems, short stories, fragments of novels, and literary essays that they would read during the last two hours of class (though at the time this study took place – as stated earlier - this time had been reduced to just one hour).

‘El grupo’ has produced several important contemporary authors for Mexico during its existence, such as Alicia Trueba (already mentioned), who wrote the novels *Los colores del principio* (1992) and *Viudos y soteronas* (1994), and Guadalupe Loaeza, an active journalist who has repeatedly stated that she received her principal training as a writer while a member of the workshop, and who has published several books including, *Las reinas de Polanco* (1988), *Primero las damas* (1990) and *Compro, luego existo* (1993). Silvia Molina launched her first novel *La mañana debe ser gris* (1977) (which won the prestigious Xavier Villaruta prize) as a result of her participation in ‘El grupo’, and with the help specifically of Elena Poniatowska and Hugo Hiriart. Another writer who claims that she owes her entire literary career to ‘El grupo’ and its tutelage is Rosa Nissán. Both of her principal novels, *Novia que te vea* (1992) and *Hisho que te nazca* (1996) were written during the time she spent attending the writers’ workshop.

Aside from the aforementioned novels, there is another publication that has provided other members of ‘El Grupo’ with the opportunity to publish their literary works. This is the locally produced literary magazine already mentioned: *Palabraísmos*, which mainly publishes short stories and poems written by the members of the workshop. Although it is an official publication that is sent to a publishing house to be prepared and bound professionally, *Palabraísmos* is not distributed neither sold for commercial gain.

Copies of this magazine can only be obtained either through personal membership of the workshop or through direct contact with one of its students or instructors.

During an interview with Rodrigo Ávila, one of the workshop's members, the latter was keen to emphasize that, aside from teaching creative writing, the literary workshop has introduced many of its students to the world of professional journalism:

Hay una cosa muy importante que ahorita se me viene a la mente. Que es de cómo unas [participantes del taller], de escribir la literatura, de entrar a la literatura, del terreno de la literatura, llegaron al periodismo. Sandi Selorio, Adela Seloria le llegó mucho al periodismo en el *Unomásuno*. Rosa Nissán, actualmente y del tiempo atrás, publicó y publica en la *Jornada Semanal*. Olga Juandez es directora del periódico el *Siglo del Torreón*. También hubo mucha influencia del periodismo en el taller. Digo, yo creo que también porque Elena prácticamente es periodista ¿no? (IRA)

Aside from the individuals Rodrigo Ávila mentioned above, there are several others in 'El grupo' who are journalists. Ávila himself is a journalist by profession. Guadalupe Loaeza is another well-known journalist in Mexico City who formed a part of the 'taller' for several years. Yet another member of this literary workshop, Lucero Balcazar, apart from being a poet and a journalist, is also a political cartoonist for different newspapers. It is clear that one of the definitive qualities of this writer's workshop is the marked

influence the field of journalism exercises over the group. Rodrigo Ávila attributes this to Elena Poniatowska's influence on the workshop.

Later in his interview, Rodrigo Ávila was asked if there were ever any problems within the literary workshop. His response was that, on a personal level, there are never any real 'quandaries' amongst the students (i.e. ego problems). He did mention, however, that recently 'El grupo' has been suffering from economic difficulties. He explained that this has occurred due to the fact that the number of members has gradually been diminishing with time and, since the 'taller' is no longer affiliated with any other institution, it has had difficulty sustaining itself with the steadily diminishing budget it receives as the student body shrinks.⁶ Ávila explained that the dilemma has reached such a point that *Palabraísmos* – whose publication depended on the students' tuition – has not been published for some time now due to lack of funds.

With a general history of the literary workshop established, it is now possible to review the different experiences that one of its principal teachers, Elena Poniatowska, has had while participating in and directing this particular writers' workshop as well as considering one of the main influences on Poniatowska's texts.

In the early 1970s Elena Poniatowska, who was by that time already a well-established writer and journalist, was contracted to teach 'creación literaria'. Although she stressed that she was not the only person who taught the class, it is well known that after twenty-five years, when she left the group in 1997, her influence was more ingrained in the students than that of any other instructor to date. When speaking of her own apprenticeship as a writer, Poniatowska said that, personally, she had never really formed a part of a writer's workshop with the exception of the year she spent with Juan

Rulfo at *El centro de escritores mexicanos* in 1957. Though during that experience she explains, there were a great deal of writers who made up a part of the workshop and she was only able to participate (read her materials to the group) once every two months. This would have allowed her to share her work approximately six times with her group while she was at the writer's center. Poniatowska claimed that most of her formal formation as a writer came from what she learned from 'redacción' at the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* and the private lessons she took from the renowned Mexican writer, Juan Arreola:

A mí me dijeron que el maestro Arreola me podía ayudar a mejorar mis textos escritos. Cuando llegué a donde él me dijo que no le interesaba el periodismo, pero que lo que le podía interesar eran cuentos. Que le trajera cuentos. Así hice y eso fue como salió mi primer libro de cuentos *Lilus Kikus*. (IEP) ⁷

None the less, with respect to her own work of a quarter a century as an instructor of literary creation she revealed little and, indeed, rather modestly minimized her own role in the workshop. At one point in the interview, Poniatowska was asked who dedicated the most time to correcting the student's texts. She responded:

Hablábamos todas.⁸ Cada quien daba su opinión. Eran veinte a veintidós opiniones. Se lanzaba el texto. Se decía por qué era bueno, o por qué era malo, o por qué era infame, o por qué era mediocre, o por qué era

excelente, o por qué había que felicitarle a la persona. Después, en general, eran capítulos de novela o cuentos o ensayo literario, - hasta poesía-. Pero yo realmente no soy crítica de poesía. Me gusta mucho, pero no. (IEP)

Though she tended to de-emphasize her own role, it is implied that she was the one –after all the opinions are given – who decided the final verdict on each text read during a class session.

When questioned about her work as a professor of literary creation, she was avid to promote her own students' work rather than her own. Poniatowska mentioned the success of her former students such as Silvia Molina, Guadalupe Loaeza, Fidela Cabriola, and Rosa Nissán, putting their names forward as professional writers who had emerged from 'El grupo' during her years as its instructor. When asked what specific writing strategies she attempted to teach to her students, Poniatowska offered one of her characteristically humble responses:

Yo creo que todo lo hacía como todo lo he hecho en la vida: como burro que tocó la flauta, con la pura intuición. [...] Había clases muy buenas; clases menos buenas; clases, francamente yo creo, mediocres o malas; pero en general yo creo que se trabajó con una constancia durante veinte a veinticinco años. (IEP)

Though she only pointed to it indirectly at that moment, later in the interview Poniatowska affirmed what Rodrigo Ávila asserted earlier: that Poniatowska's own journalistic training must have made up a part of the skills she used in conducting her workshop. She emphasized this at another point in the interview when she claimed that the majority of authors 'escriben a partir de las experiencias que tienen' (IEP). However, her time spent in 'redacción' was not the only formative moment she appears to have had; for Elena Poniatowska one of those experiences that marked her writing was the time she spent with the anthropologist Oscar Lewis.

A social scientist mostly famous for his work in Latin America, Lewis was born in New York, on 25 December, 1914. The son of Jewish immigrants from Poland, he was given the name of Yehezkiel Lefkowitz (his parents also gave him the Anglicized first name Oscar) though he would – like some of his relatives who settled in England - later change his last name to Lewis.⁹ After spending most of his childhood and adolescence in the countryside in the state of New York, he first studied history at College of the City of New York and later obtained a doctorate in anthropology from Columbia University.¹⁰ Soon after graduation, Lewis began working for the US government – during which time he learned Spanish and had his initial contacts with Latin America – but, after a few years, Lewis acquired an academic post. It was during that period that he would create and publish the majority of his works on the subaltern in Spanish America.

In creating these texts, Lewis would analyze household economy, personality tests, interviews and day studies in order to create 'a picture of total culture' (Rigdon 1988, 37). It was while he carried out this research that he became particularly interested in culture and personality. Lewis' personality studies led him to the urban poor in Mexico

City, to the creation of his theory named ‘the culture of poverty’.¹¹ With the use of the interview – recorded by hand at first and then, as technology grew, and with the help of a tape recorder – he was able to reproduce his informants’ life stories. His purpose in doing so was:

To expose and to convince [...] but not to solve. I don’t think I have the solution, nor do I think that it is my task. My goal has been to acquaint the whole reading public – the middle class, and the upper class that wields the power – with how these people live. The first step toward revolution is to live with these poor people and to gain their confidence. (Rigdon 1988, 151)

By allowing the poor to speak for themselves in his work, Lewis felt he could help to:

[...] bridge the communications gap between the very poor and the middle-class personnel – teachers, social workers, doctors, priests, and others – who bear the major responsibility for carrying out anti-poverty programs [by providing] a deeper understanding of the poor, their individuality, and the great variety in their life styles so that all the poor are not lumped together in a similar, blurred homogenous mass. (Rigdon 1988, 151)

The first text he published of this type was *The Children of Sanchez* (which he originally intended to call *Los de abajo* - 1958 – alluding to Azuela's famous novel of the same title). This book uses material gleaned from several years of interviews and anthropological research to reproduce Jesús Sanchez's life story and that of his four children. In a style much his own, Lewis created a portrait of the family by allowing each individual family member to tell his or her own version of their life. In this case, Lewis used the father, Jesús Sánchez, as the central figure and the framework of this text and places Jesús' children within this construct in order to preserve the semblance of the family unit amongst their different accounts. This method of allowing each member of the family to 'share' his or her life story, and then bringing them together with an introduction given by Lewis (in order to orient the reader and give him a better grasp of his studies on 'the culture of poverty') was a procedure Lewis would continue to use in the majority of the anthropological texts he published Thereafter.¹²

However, it was precisely due to the fact that Lewis focused on individual life and family histories that his work has been the object of criticism. Susan Rigdon has pointed out some of the weaknesses of Lewis' thesis in her study *The Cultural Façade*:

In relying heavily on his impressions to make and support his generalizations, Lewis gave full vent to personal characteristics that actually worked to distort his data: he was more influenced by visual stimuli than by reasoned analysis; he was fascinated by extremes in personality and behavior; and he tended to hyperbole in his speaking and writing. The most extreme cases of poverty and the most extreme

responses to it overshadowed the more typical or ordinary, and it was often these exceptional cases that Lewis singled out for publication. If anthropologists, as he claimed, often had ‘omitted their most vivid and dynamic’ cases in order to identify a general pattern, he himself ignored the general pattern in favor of concentrating on his most vivid and dynamic material. Lewis wanted to convey to readers precisely those observable aspects of his informants’ lives that had so influenced him too. (Rigdon 1988, 125)

Oscar Lewis himself noted the fact that, at times, the people he presented in his studies were not the best examples to support his theory on the culture of poverty, but rather the most interesting and entertaining. He explained that such was the case with *The Children of Sánchez* when offering suggestions for the subtitle of that book:

‘The Culture of Poverty’ is a catchy phrase ... [but] the Sánchez family is not the best example. ... The family of the maternal aunt Guadalupe would have been much better¹³, but by the same token much less expressive. (Rigdon 1988, 60)

Lewis’ custom of using not the best representatives of his cultural theory in his work, but rather, the most vivid and dynamic material may have brought him some criticism, but by combining art with social science to generate his publications he created excellent examples of what has been called an ‘[...] original contribution to the literature of

anthropology [...]’ (Lewis 1967, 1). These books became best sellers which were useful for making more people aware - regardless of whether the portrayal was accurate or not – of poverty in Mexico, Puerto Rico and other parts of the world. In this sense he was extremely successful.

Poniatowska became acquainted with Oscar Lewis’ methodology while she worked with him on *Pedro Martinez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family*. Though she did not serve as his assistant for a long period of time, she was well acquainted with his work and interviewed him at length. In an article on her most famous novel, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, she remarked on Lewis’ influence on her work:

Para escribir el libro de la Jesusa utilicé un procedimiento periodístico: la entrevista. Dos años, trabajé durante mes y medio con el antropólogo norteamericano Oscar Lewis, autor de *Los Hijos (sic) de Sánchez* y otros libros, Lewis me pidió que lo ayudara a ‘editar’ *Pedro Martínez, la vida de un campesino de Tepoztlán*. Lewis contaba con un equipo que recababa los datos, hacía una especie de levantamiento topográfico de la pobreza. Sus informantes venían a verlo a su departamento de la calle de Gutenberg: él prendía su grabadora, interrogaba y a mí me tocó limpiar esos relatos de su hojarasca; es decir, eliminar las repeticiones y divagaciones inútiles. Esta experiencia sin duda ha de haberme marcado al escribir *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. (Poniatowska 1978, 8)

In addition to using much of the methodology Lewis employed in his research – establishing a rapport with his informants, spending time with them in their residence, work and play, etc. -, after working with Lewis she too began to publish on the urban poor. Up until that point she had only really published books on Mexico's middle and upper classes, such as her book of short stories about a young bourgeois girl growing up in Mexico: *Lilus Kikus* (1954) and *Palabras Cruzadas* (1961) - a book mostly made up of interviews with prominent individuals in Mexico (i.e. Diego Rivera, Luis Buñel, and María Felix).

Rather like Oscar Lewis, when asked what her principal obsession with literature was, Poniatowska responded: 'Mi obsesión principal es transmitir algo que ayude, no sé, es una cosa difícil de decir' (García Martínez 1991). This passion for creating helpful texts can be seen in many of her works to date. *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) is a novel that enhances awareness about the poverty-stricken classes in Mexico City by sharing with the reader a substantial number of texts that narrate sections of Jesusa Palancares' life. *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) follows the student movement prior to the massacre in *La plaza de la tres culturas*, focuses on the events that occurred there, on October 2, 1968, and also includes samples of the protest literature generated by the massacre. In 1980, Poniatowska published *Fuerte es el silencio*, a compilation of five different chronicles of investigative reporting that denounce various social problems in Mexico ranging from the high level of sub-employment, unemployment, and poverty amongst Mexicans who arrive in the capital from the provinces, to the dilemma of the political prisoners and 'desaparecidos' in Mexico. Eight years later, Elena Poniatowska, with the help of several members of the literary workshop, published *Nada, Nadie: las*

voces del temblor (1988), a book that follows the events that took place during and after the great Mexico City earthquake in 1985 recording many personal testimonies of heroism and loss whilst denouncing corruption in areas of the Mexican public services and government. More recently, Poniatowska has published *Luz y Luna, las Lunitas* (1994) and *El niño: niños de la calle, Ciudad de México* (1999). The first book, *Luz y Luna, las Lunitas*, reviews several aspects of Mexico and Mexican Society that do not usually receive much attention: a historical look at some of the past livelihoods in the capital, woman's rights in Mexico, a Mexican community in which the women appear to exercise more authority than the men, and the products of a female artistic community in the state of Guerrero. The text Poniatowska wrote for *El niño: niños de la calle, Ciudad de México*¹⁴ - adds a further dimension to a subject that is, more often than not, swept under the carpet in the Mexican Capital. In one way or another, as we can see, all of the books mentioned above have helped to create an awareness of either a social problem (as is the case of *El niño*), to denounce a crime (as in *La noche de Tlatelolco*), or to focus on an oft forgotten or virtually unknown aspect of Mexico (such as the 'El último guajolote' in *Luz, luna, las lunitas*).

As in Lewis' case, Poniatowska also appears to have the goal of acquainting a broad spectrum of the reading public with how her subjects live and what is happening in Mexican society. In addition, the majority of Poniatowska's books focus on many of the marginal members of society (like Jesusa in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*). Many of her characters are subaltern members of society for various reasons: poverty, lack of education, age, and even religion. Another attribute of Ponaitowska's works is that even though she often focuses on large national or regional problems, she employs individual

testimony to do so. This use of the voice of ‘the other’ is yet another technique she shares with Oscar Lewis. It would be easy to overestimate Lewis’ influence on Poniatowska’s work; however, after studying her work from before and after the time she spent working as a volunteer for this anthropologist it becomes easy to observe the trends and methodologies that both intellectuals share.

Poniatowska herself has influenced a whole generation of writers through her literary workshop. The next part of this chapter will briefly discuss the work of several of those authors and will focus on two of her students in particular: Silvia Molina and Rosa Nissán.

In the mid-seventies, when ‘El grupo’ was still relatively young, Silvia Molina entered the writer’s workshop with the hope of being taught by José Agustín. At that time Agustín was one of the leading members of a Mexican literary movement called ‘la Onda’.¹⁵ She described her experience and feelings as follows:

Empecé a escribir desde la preparatoria. Escribí una novela que se llamó *Esos fueron los días*. [...] La escribí después de haber leído *De perfil* de José Agustín. Yo siempre había tenido muchos deseos de escribir, pero pensaba que era muy difícil; cuando leí a José Agustín, me animó muchísimo ver que hablaba un poco de las cosas que a mí me gustaría tratar, y que además su lenguaje era bastante cotidiano. Entonces pensé que no era tan difícil hacerlo, y escribí la novela. Ese texto lo rompí cuando entré a un taller en el que daban clases Elena Poniatowska y Hugo Hiriart, adónde fui porque me habían dicho que José Agustín estaba dando

clases; pensé que era mi oportunidad. Cuando llegué, José Agustín se acababa de ir a Estados Unidos, y nunca lo conocí. Pero me quedé en el taller [...]. (Molina 1983)

Although she never met José Agustín, Molina did come into contact with two valuable writing teachers and several classmates who would help her create her first published novel.

At this time, as was mentioned earlier, the class was divided into two sections. Hugo Hiriart was teaching *El Quijote* during the time dedicated to literature and Elena Poniatowska was teaching creative writing. Molina describes her experience as Hiriart's pupil as follows: 'leímos el Quijote, fue la mejor lectura que tuve yo durante la época que estuve en el taller, fue mi mejor experiencia y después nos hicimos muy amigos [...].'¹⁶ Nevertheless, in another interview between Elena Poniatowska and Silvia Molina, Molina explained that, although at first she did not write often for the workshop, Poniatowska helped her to commit herself to a literary career:

Un día llegaste tú Elena, al taller y nos regañaste porque nadie tomaba en serio lo que se hacía; que escribíamos poco; que era un oficio; que todo lo teníamos en nosotras mismas; que de nosotras dependía; que había que escribir algo todos los días y yo te tomé en serio, y me dije: 'Voy a escribir'. Empecé pero ya llevaba muchas cuartillas para cuento y pensé que lo que hacía era pésimo y que no valía la pena. Un día me armé de valor y lo leí en clase. La crítica entre nosotras era muy fuerte, sobre todo

la tuya, nos destrozábamos todo, pero dije: ‘Bueno, voy a atreverme’. Me entusiasmaron para que siguiera escribiendo, fui a la hemeroteca a sacar algunos datos y fue saliendo poco a poco la novela de *La mañana debe seguir gris*, que según yo iba a ser un cuento. (Poniatowska 1996, 34)

This comment demonstrates that Poniatowska was one of the principle motivators amongst the writers. Molina’s words make it possible to infer that Poniatowska did indeed have a key role in the correction that took place in the texts that were being written in the literary workshop. In addition, we learn that Poniatowska habitually expressed the strongest critique in the ‘taller’ during the time that Molina participated in the workshop. Moreover, we are able to observe the active role Molina adopted with her studies. In another interview, Molina explains more about how this writing experience helped her to know she was a writer and why her novel *La mañana debe seguir gris* began as a short story:

Después estaba en un taller literario y una de las asistentes anunció que habría un concurso en una revista de cuentos. Motivada por el concurso escribí cuentos pero no me salían. Entonces me di cuenta de que no me interesaba mucho el concurso, lo que me interesaba era recontarme a mí misma una historia, componerla en mi interior. (Molina 1993b, 4)

So, as noted in the passages above, although Silvia Molina was interested in writing and had attempted to create a novel on her own, ‘El grupo’ and its influence proved to be

decisive in Molina's career as an author, because it manifested to her that her principle interest was the construction of the narrative itself.

Apart from helping her to decide to become a writer, Molina has also recognized the different ways in which her two principal mentors from 'El grupo' helped her. Though both Poniatowska and Hiriart assisted in the creation of her first novel and her transformation into a professional writer, each one played a different role. Molina has stated that it was the help and encouragement of Poniatowska (along with her practical corrections) and of other members of the workshop that assisted her in the creation of the first version of her novel *La mañana debe seguir gris*. Once the first version of the novel was completed, Hiriart requested to see it (since he, too, was an established author). After reading the manuscript, Hiriart suggested to Molina that she should make some changes to improve upon the novel.¹⁷ Silvia explained Hugo Hiriart's influence on her work as follows:

[...] cuando yo terminé la novela se la di a leer a Hugo. Elena le comentó que yo había terminado la novela y Hugo la quiso leer ¿no? Y después Hugo me llamó y me dijo: 'Esto hay que trabajarlo todavía.' Entonces yo ya había hecho como mi borrador con Elena, y cuando me senté a trabajar con Hugo, realmente me di cuenta de lo que era la literatura, de que era una cosa seria. Él me dijo: 'No tienes malicia literaria.' Y yo no sabía lo que era la malicia literaria ¿no? ¿Qué cosa era la malicia literaria? Y me decía: 'Es algo que tú vas a aprender sola. Yo no te lo puedo explicar ¿no?' Pero me hizo reflexionar en torno a los personajes, el lenguaje ¿no?

De hecho, después de trabajar con Hugo en la novela, aumentó. La cronología que aparece al principio, no estaba. Puse todos los epígrafos con los que arrancaban todos los capítulos y no estaban en la novela, puse un personaje de más que no existía, porque no decía, por ejemplo, no hay tensión, él realmente me enseñó con esta mirada de filósofo digamos ¿no? De la gente, de las experiencias, la reflexión literaria, que para mí fue la mejor enseñanza que tuve. En cuidado, es un hombre muy delicado para escribir y era, fue, lo que a mí me entusiasmó de la literatura, por eso te digo. Yo así aprendí a escribir. Yo aprendí a escribir y que no había que calificar. Porque los adjetivos ya están gastados; por ejemplo si tú dices es una mujer bella, no te la puedes imaginar hasta que no haya una manera de imaginar una mujer bella. Si tu dices narigona, digamos, entonces tú ya empiezas a poder visualizar algo. Y eso pues fue lo que yo aprendí con él realmente. No solamente, la reflexión sino la observación, la delicadeza para el lenguaje, la limpieza, quitar, quitar, si no dices nada diferente es mejor no poner adjetivos, mientras más directo es mejor, mientras más sencillo es mejor, es difícil ¿no? Uno cree que te sientas a escribir y uno escribe ¿no? y luego el chiste es ir limpiando ¿no? [...] (ISM)

In one sense, though each role was vital to her formation as a writer, Poniatowska appears to be the person who first inspired her to write and cultivate her first literary efforts, whereas Hiriart seems to have maintained a more tutorial relationship with Molina outside of the classroom setting and taught her specific techniques with relation

to style. When comparing her two mentors, Silvia Molina made the following distinction about the influences each had on her work: ‘Con ella [Elena] aprendí lo que era la corrección. Pero quien realmente me formó como escritora fue Hugo Hiriart’ (ISM). It is important to remember that Hiriart’s effect on Molina was quite different due to the fact that he was more of a personal tutor, whereas Poniatowska was a teacher who taught a larger group. In both cases the level of contact must have been different. In a separate interview, an interesting anecdote that Molina recalls with respect to the combined efforts of her two tutors is that when the time had come to publish the novel, both Hiriart and Poniatowska accompanied Silvia Molina to the publishing house and subsequently liaised on her behalf with the editor-in-chief (De Beer 1996, 76). The introduction clearly paid off for Molina’s first novel *La mañana debe seguir gris*, because it later went on to win the prestigious Xavier Villarrutia prize in 1978. This was a feat that took the author completely by surprise.¹⁸

Though Silvia Molina left the literary taller over twenty years ago she was well remembered by current members. Most of this is due to the prestige Molina’s highly successful literary career has brought to ‘El grupo’. Since leaving, Molina has written seven novels, two collections of short stories, created two anthologies, founded a publishing house for children’s books and has authored several children’s books herself. She has headed her own literary workshops that have helped to launch other important Mexican authors such as Ignacillo Padilla and Jorge Volpi, has taught literature at several universities and has been the writer in residence in Brigham Young University in the United States. At present (2004) she is the cultural attaché for the Mexican Embassy in Brussels, Belgium.

After Alicia Trueba, who has been the most stalwart member of ‘El grupo’, Rosa Nissán comes in as a close second. ‘Rosita’, as she is familiarly referred to by several members of the group, began attending in 1977. At that time her youngest child (now an adult in his thirties) entered primary school and she was left with a large portion of her morning and early afternoons free. As a result, Rosa Nissán enrolled in an institution for adult education and began to take music appreciation classes. However, her professor (even though he was quite a good professor, she explained) would frequently fail to appear and Nissán would attend some other class that was taught at the same time. Fortunately, her absentee professor transferred to the Instituto Kairos where Elena Poniatowska taught her literary workshop. Her music teacher, true to form, would often absent himself and this created an ideal opportunity for Nissán to attend ‘El grupo’, which happened to coincide with the music lesson.

In an interview between Rosa Nissán and the author, Nissán pointed out that Elena Poniatowska was ‘mi principal maestra’. Furthermore, Nissán explains: ‘[Poniatowska] Es una de las personas que más quiero en mi vida. [...] Ella me cambió la vida haciéndome escritora’ (IRN1). Rosita confirmed that she really has had no other teacher besides Poniatowska and her participation in the literary workshop. Indeed, the first twenty of the twenty-seven years Nissán has spent in the workshop were under Elena Poniatowska’s direct tutelage. Aside from participating in several written projects with Poniatowska and the rest of ‘El grupo’, she is one of Poniatowska’s personal photographers. Such prolonged and intensive contact between the two writers has ensured that Poniatowska’s mark was left on Nissán’s novels.

Nissán, whose formal education ended when she graduated from a technical school at the age of sixteen, recalled that - for several reasons - she did not actively participate when she first attended the workshop. She described herself as being very timid and would hide beneath her 'jorongo' (poncho) when the attention of the group would focus on her. Rosa Nissán claimed that because no one forced her to participate, she gradually integrated into 'El grupo', though a long time would pass before she would actually share texts with the rest of the class.

One of the key turning points that encouraged Rosita to write her first two novels, *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*, was her reading of a poem written by León Felipe to his grandfather. This inspired her to write a short text on her own grandfather, which she later read to her classmates. The text described her grandfather (of whom she had a somewhat negative opinion); after Nissán shared her piece Elena Poniatowska asked: '¿Ése es tu abuelo?', to which Nissán responded: 'Sí, qué horror ¿verdad?'. On the contrary, Poniatowska was interested and told her: 'Su abuelo es un personaje. Tráeme más de él' (IRN1). What resulted were two semi-autobiographical novels based on Nissán's life and family, the first of which (*Novia que te vea*) has been made into a full-length movie. (This motion picture and various aspects concerning it and Nissán are discussed in greater detail in chapter five.)

When Rosa Nissán was asked if there was a common theme employed by the writers who have made up the workshop, she said she did not believe there was. She felt that the texts produced within 'El grupo' were quite different. She attributed this to the fact that 'El taller se saca de cada quien la que es' (IRN1).¹⁹ In using this phrase, Nissán made two statements. The first one being that this literary workshop was meant to make

the writer look inside his or herself and bring out their inner themes, thoughts, or experiences in their written work and that, because each individual is unique, each text will be distinct for each author. The uniqueness of Rosa Nissán's life and the transformations it has gone through is definitely evident in her work. 'El grupo' has seen Nissán go from a house-wife, to a divorcee struggling to earn a living as a photographer, to the present day novelist and journalist she is. Rosa Nissán has come full-circle over the last twenty-seven years, changing from a silent participant in a literary workshop into an outgoing teacher of her own 'taller literario'.

As was seen earlier in this chapter, when questioned as to what specific principles she taught in her literary workshop that helped to mold the aforementioned students, Poniatowska was reluctant to give concrete details and keen to downplay any formal agenda in her classroom. However, in several different interviews, Silvia Molina and Rosa Nissán share some of the principles they learned during the time they worked under Elena Poniatowska. This next section will review three key principles these students learned and consider what impact they had on their literary work.

One of the principles that both authors have most often said they learned from their mentor is discipline. Molina emphasized this point in an interview for a Mexican newspaper:

Fundamentalmente, me di cuenta que el oficio de escribir era un oficio de disciplina y de trabajo gracias a Elena Poniatowska. Cuando yo estaba con ella en el taller, nosotros trabajábamos muy poco; entonces, un día ella llegó muy enojada al taller y nos dijo que escribir no era escribir una

cuartilla veinte minutos antes de llegar al taller. Ella nos enseñó que escribir era un oficio, el cual requería muchísima disciplina y que debía hacerse todos los días, fuera para ir a un taller o para publicar o no publicar. Me acuerdo perfectamente que nos dijo: ‘Lo que no hagan ustedes por ustedes mismos, nadie lo va a hacer.’ (Molina 1983)

In another interview in which Silvia Molina spoke with Elena Poniatowska, Molina summarized the experience above once more and this time she explained the effect her teacher’s lecture had on her: ‘[...] yo te tomé en serio, y me dije: “Voy a escribir”’. At that point Silvia Molina began writing what would be her first novel *La mañana debe seguir gris*.

Almost ten years later, Rosa Nissán would reveal an experience, very similar to the one Molina described, that motivated her to write her own novels:

Un día nos dijo que se iba del taller, que no valía la pena estar dando clases a señoras que no creaban nada, que teníamos cosas y no las aprovechábamos, que estaba perdiendo su tiempo. No quisimos que se fuera y me puse a escribir. Verla trabajar a ella. Una mujer muy loca, muy chambeadora, me motivó. Tengo ahora dos novelas avanzadas y tengo muchísimas ganas de escribir en serio. (Flores 1992)

During an interview in the summer of 2002, Nissán reiterated this statement quite clearly while describing how Poniatowska's commitment to her work had influenced her own personal dedication to writing:

¿Lo que a usted le ha permitido escribir es involucrarse en el taller?

-En el taller y ver el trabajo de Elena y la disciplina de Elena. Porque si ella es disciplinada, su alumna también lo es. (IRN1)

The principle of discipline is important when it comes to defining what key concepts Elena Poniatowska taught in her literary workshop. This is true mainly due to the fact that, at least in the two cases seen here, understanding and applying discipline to their work is one of the principles that separates the 'aficionados' from the 'escritores publicados'. In both cases, it was seeing Elena Poniatowska work, and hearing her tell them that being a writer was a task that required discipline (along with the threat that she was going to leave the literary workshop) that initially motivated both writers to begin the process that would make them authors in their own right.

Another strategy Elena Poniatowska instilled in her students was the need to correct and rewrite as an essential element in the process of literary creation. Silvia Molina mentioned this as one of the key principles she learned during her time as a student in Elena Poniatowska's literary workshop.

[Elena Poniatowska] Me enseñó bastante cuando yo comencé a escribir.

No sabía que el trabajo de la literatura era la limpieza. Con ella aprendí lo

que era la corrección. [...] Elena así me enseñó el oficio de la corrección al principio digamos [...].²⁰

Silvia Molina has pointed out of page forty-seven of this thesis that before becoming a part of Poniatowska's literary workshop she had written a novel entitled *Esos fueron los días* (also the name of a popular song in Latin America) after reading *De Perfil* by José Agustín, but that, subsequent to enrolling in Poniatowska's class, she tore it to shreds because she realized it was poorly written. Under Poniatowska's tutelage, Molina became aware that in order to be a successful writer the individual has to learn not only to write, but also to *polish* their narrative to perfection.

Rosa Nissán has also learned the importance of editing and reworking her text in order to improve its quality. A large proportion of the third section of her autobiographical novel, *Hisho que te nazca*, is dedicated to describing the creation of her first novel, *Novia que te vea*, and the majority of that segment focuses on the many hours she spends rewriting and polishing her first novel. This extensive piece of meta-fiction demonstrates how the writing process greatly influenced her autobiographically-based novel. In another interview she gave when her second novel was coming out Nissán stated that Elena's corrections helped her to feel confident about her texts:

-¿Te imaginabas el éxito de *Novia*...?

-¡No, no, no!

-¿Y ahora? [con su segunda novela]

-Ahora no tengo confianza porque con *Novia que te vea* Elena la había corregido, entonces el hecho de que ella dijera que era bueno me daba fuerza. *Hisho que te nazca* se la di, pero no la pudo leer. Eso me hace sentir insegura respecto a las críticas. (Mateos 1996)

As was the case with the need to be disciplined in their working habits, the need to polish the text was one of the teachings that helped both of Poniatowska's students in becoming authors. Having learned how to polish their texts, they acquired more confidence in their writings and began to publish them.

These two writing strategies inherited from Elena Poniatowska's literary workshop are technical in nature. One focuses on the need to be consistent in one's writing (discipline), while the other emphasizes the need to polish and refine texts in order to improve their quality. An additional technique Nissán and Molina claimed Poniatowska would teach in her literary workshop had more to do with theme than style. As Molina said: 'Elena [...] me enseñó a escarbar un poco en el ser humano [...]' (ISM). Molina also described Poniatowska as a person who, when studying other individuals, went to great lengths to acquire an understanding of 'the other' that was more than just skin deep: 'Lo interesante, ella [Poniatowska] se metía como en el alma de sus personajes, era en apariencia muy dulce, pero en realidad un personaje muy agresivo para buscar en el otro ¿no?' (ISM). Poniatowska's ability to investigate the 'other' (normally through interviews) in order to create both journalism, testimonial novel, and fiction is evident in her work.²¹ Her students, Molina and Nissán, tell of how Poniatowska helped them to look inside themselves and their surroundings with the intention of motivating

them to write. With Silvia Molina it was simple. Molina states that Poniatowska encouraged her pupils by telling them: ‘que todo lo teníamos en nosotras mismas, que de nosotras dependía [...]’ (Poniatowska 1996). In Molina’s case, Molina did draw on her own life and experiences from the time when she lived in London as a young adult in order to create her first novel (and her only novel published while she formed a part of the literary workshop), *La mañana debe seguir gris*.

With Nissán, it is much more obvious that Poniatowska helped Nissán to delve into her own life, community, and family in order to create her novels. Nissán described how:

Nunca pensé escribir nada. Tomando clases de apreciación musical y un día que no llegó el maestro entré a un taller de literatura con Elena Poniatowska. Y así, cada vez que faltaba el maestro de música, entraba a la clase de Elena, hasta que un buen día me animé a escribir una cosita pequeñita a partir de un poema de León Felipe. Escribí: yo no tengo un abuelo que ganara una batalla, tengo en cambio un abuelo mandón, espantoso, monstruoso y gritón. Ese día Elena me dijo que el abuelo era muy interesante como personaje y me comprometió a escribir más sobre él y para las clases siguientes. Después me dijo que cosiéramos esos escritos, como colcha de mi novela, y cada cuartilla resultó el cuadrito de un mantel mayor. (Flores 1992)

In addition to encouraging Nissán to look to her own life for the theme of her novel, Poniatowska also inspired her student, a descendant of Sephardic Jews, to use ‘Ladino’ (a particular form of Spanish spoken by the Sephardic Jews and their descendants - of which Rosa Nissán is a part) in her novel:

Por accidente o por costumbre, solté unas palabras en ladino y Elena, muerta de la risa, dijo: ‘¿por qué hablas así?’. Para mí era normal usar esas palabras, pensé que todo el mundo me entendía, así hablo con mis amigas, porque ellas también tienen papá y mamá turcos. Y Elena fue la que insistió en que yo usara el ladino, le sonó bonito, le hizo gracia. (Vega 1992)

From the passages above, it can be said that Poniatowska took an interest in aspects of Rosa Nissán’s life that she would write for the workshop. Poniatowska’s prodding to write more and more on her life within the Jewish community in Mexico City was central to the creation of Nissán’s novel. This initial stimulation by her mentor also appears to have grown due to her classmates’ curiosity:

Siempre me llamó mucho la atención que en el taller literario nadie supiera nada de la vida de los judíos en México. Era para ellos todo sorpresa, gran curiosidad. Al darme cuenta de esa curiosidad me di cuenta de que mi pequeño mundo comunitario judío mexicano no era algo accesible para el resto de las personas. Viví durante mucho tiempo en un

mundo judío cerrado. Pensaba que todos conocían lo que yo y resultó que no. Eso me dio mucha confianza de hablar de lo que quería. Tuve una gran libertad al contar, nunca censurada. (Flores 1992)

It appears that, as Nissán delved deeper into what for most Mexicans was the hidden world of the Jewish community in Mexico City, Poniatowska and the rest of her class became increasingly interested and wanted to know more about what happened in that society. Poniatowska's interest in 'escabar en el ser humano' had extended to all the members of the workshop as they showed their curiosity towards Nissán's life – but its effects were particularly potent on Rosa Nissán as she began to dig within herself. This continued stimulation finally resulted in two novels that can boast of a unique place in contemporary Mexican letters.

Time has moved on. It has been more than twenty years since Silvia Molina published her first novel *La mañana debe seguir gris*, and over a decade has gone by since Rosa Nissán's novel *Novia que te vea* came out. Once students, these two women have gone on to lead their own literary workshops. Even though neither has written a novel with such obvious connections to their personal lives after leaving Elena Poniatowska's tutelage²² (with perhaps the exception of Silvia Molina's *Imagen de Héctor*²³) both have taught their students to 'escabar' within themselves when writing. Rosa Nissán says she believes that: 'Cada quien en realidad, en un taller literario se trata (o por lo menos yo que ahora soy maestra de taller – y así fue Elena -) de sacar a cada quien la que es. La que es ¿no?' (IRN1). In other words, for Nissán, a literary workshop is there to help the author bring out the uniqueness found in each individual, to go further

beneath the surface and attempt to let this ‘digging’, so to speak, be apparent in the texts created. In a separate interview, Molina offers a more detailed explanation of what she expects of her students:

Cuando impartía talleres literarios y me encontraba con alguna persona que me entregaba uno de esos cuentos increíbles, que nada tenía que ver con ella, le decía que eso no era literatura. Esta tiene que doler, y no porque necesariamente tenga que ser una historia atroz, sino porque tiene que partir desde muy dentro del que escribe. Una puede reinventar, contar hechos que no sucedieron, pero siempre anclado en este deseo de decir lo que nos duele. Yo les decía que leyeran mucho hasta que encontraran ese *algo* que les despertara lo que realmente tenían que decir. (Espinosa 1998, 31)

In both cases, Molina and Nissán, as teachers, attempt to inspire their students to probe within themselves in order to extract the themes that would make up their most valuable literary pieces. So, while it would not necessarily be correct to state that these women do exactly what their mentor Poniatowska did in their literary workshops, they do teach, like Poniatowska, that one should work ‘from the inside out’ when creating literature.

When further considering Poniatowska’s impact on the ‘taller’ and the individuals who have formed a part of it, it is useful to review the only book-length publication this literary workshop has created. Though not a well-known fact, Elena Poniatowska’s book of chronicles *Nada, nadie: las voces del temblor* is also intimately linked to this group.

This text is a compilation of many testimonies of the inhabitants of Mexico City who were affected by the earthquake in September 1985. After the disaster had struck Mexico, Poniatowska arrived at the literary workshop in San Angel and explained to her students that it was not the time to be writing literature:

En 1985, cuando el terremoto, yo recuerdo que les dije que no era momento de hacer literatura ni de encerrarse en un taller. Que había que salir a la calle a ver en qué se podía ayudar. Y entonces, todas salieron y entraron en contacto con la gente. Descubrieron partes de la Ciudad de México que ni siquiera conocían. Había señoras que jamás habían ido a Tepito, a la Bondonjito, a la Colonia Guerrero. Fueron por primera vez. Y todo eso las enriqueció, les ayudó. Entrevistaban a la gente, y algunas, como muchas otras mujeres de México y hombres de México les ayudaban concretamente, porque los primeros días se hacían tortas, se hervía agua, de todas las casas se juntaban medicinas, ropa, lo que se iba necesitando. (IEP)

Instead, what they did was create a text that reviewed what occurred the day of the earthquake and how the inhabitants of Mexico City, the municipal authorities, the Mexican Government, and the world reacted to this natural disaster. Poniatowska and the members of the writers' workshop reviewed some of the principal headlines from around the world with respect to what was happening in Mexico, but the majority of this book is dedicated to gathering and transcribing a large number of testimonies from those who

lived through the earthquake – from both people directly affected by the destruction and from the many individuals who helped to save the victims. However, in addition to creating a written history of many of the events that came about as a consequence of the tragedy, this book has also generated financial support for the victims of the earthquake by dedicating its royalties to them.

This collaborative experience put many of the workshop's members in contact with the type of journalism and writing Poniatowska had been practising for several years, an example of which can be seen in her book, *Fuerte es el silencio* (1980). However, it is important to point out that, for some, gathering the testimonies from this particular tragedy would prove to be too much to deal with at that moment in their lives. Rosa Nissán, who began working on *Nada, nadie* with Poniatowska, later abandoned the project²⁴ because the sadness and suffering overwhelmed her.²⁵ None the less, the project continued apace and was completed, creating one of the only collaboratively-produced books that covered one of Mexico's greatest tragedies.

Another reason that *Nada, nadie* is so important is because it offers its readers an alternative view of the events that followed Mexico City's earthquake and how this affected its inhabitants. It is a helpful tool that enables the reader to become more aware of some of the key differences between this and other texts that record the disaster. When reviewing the headlines and reports that emerged in *El Universal*, for example, on the dates that followed the 1985 quake, it is clear that its editors had a different focus than that of Poniatowska and her literary workshop. Although the previous government bodies were blamed for not having enforced building standards more rigorously, the present government was never the object of open criticism as a result of the disaster. Instead of

focusing of past mistakes, *El Universal* chose rather to highlight the government's promises to address the problems consequent upon the tragedy. For example, most of the headlines in early October spoke of how the government would defer payments of the national debt in order to obtain the funds necessary to help the victims of the catastrophe.²⁶ There were promises to place stricter controls on the building materials that would be used in future constructions. The governmental agency for education (la Secretaría de Educación Pública) committed to creating new classrooms and school schedules for those areas that had been affected by the disaster. Basically, *El Universal* allows itself to be a sounding board for the government and its future plans for rebuilding the Mexican capital. Likewise, this newspaper tended to focus on the rescues that were taking place – or in some cases, that had already taken place – throughout the city. Statistics that listed the number of people found, identified or rescued were published, along with scores of photographs of the rescue work in progress. In other instances, *El Universal* also mentioned the different amounts of aid received. As was the case when it reported on the creation of the largest medical center in Latin America which was built on a football field in Mexico City thanks to aid received from Brazil and other neighboring countries, or the monetary donation valued at one billion Mexican pesos it received from Volkswagen.²⁷ Although *El Universal* did make a sound effort to underline the good that can be found in trying times, it also published articles and photographs of what it describes as scavengers: the people who rummaged through the wreckage in search of goods they could steal and later resell. In all instances, the newspaper reporters showed pictures of individuals who appeared to be of the lower social classes who were carrying out this type of activity.

On the other hand, *Nada, nadie* counterbalanced *El Universal*'s stories on the scavengers with the testimony of Raúl Pérez Pereya who told of how an army captain took a jewelry box from him while he was gathering his personal items from amongst the debris of his home. In the end, Pérez Pereya was only able to recover half of the jewelry that was taken from the military officials; and that was only possible after approximately one month of trying to reclaim them (Poniatowska 1988, 124-128). Poniatowska and her students tended to use testimony to focus on the individual effects that the earthquake had on the inhabitants of Mexico City. While it is true that this book did cover some of the same stories found in the capital's daily newspapers, its approach was somewhat different. Though it is quite fragmentary in its composition, some academics believe that it is one of the documents that encompasses the event most completely. Canclini has described it in the following manner:

[*Nada, nadie* is] Perhaps the only totalizing narratives of Mexico City that achieved some verisimilitude in recent years have been the chronicles of Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska; they describe the solidarity of the survivors of the 1985 earthquake participating in their political and ecological performances. Confronted with the city's chaos, they sought to restore some measure of natural unity. (Canclini 2001, 85)²⁸

Nada, nadie attempted to put a face on at least some of the participants of these events by using individual testimonies of those who were directly affected by it. One such case is that of the clandestine clothing factories in Mexico City that collapsed during the

earthquake, killing hundreds instantly whilst trapping many more under the rubble (Poniatowska 1988, 145-156). Whilst *El Universal* did report on the incident and denounced the existence of the sweatshops, Poniatowska's chronicle went deeper by interviewing many of its survivors and the loved ones of those who disappeared in the debris, in effect, following Poniatowska's precept, mentioned earlier in this chapter, of 'escarbar en lo humano' (ISM). In so doing, *Nada, nadie* gave the reader a clearer idea of the lives of the workers who survived the catastrophe and the efforts of the families to find their relatives who were abandoned in the factories' ruins by its owners. In the scant instances where *El Universal* used brief testimonies,²⁹ they were linked to the heroism of la Secretaría General de Protección y Vialidad. This helped to strengthen the positive image of the Mexican governmental institutions in the public eye. Another way in which Poniatowska's publication differed from the newspaper in question is that her text pointed out specific cases where the government and its different institutions, such as the army, failed to help in the rescue work, and in other cases were actually detrimental to it. In *El Universal*, by contrast, the soldiers were only pictured offering assistance during the crisis.

However, *Nada, nadie* is not entirely dedicated to denouncing faults in the Mexican government. Poniatowska and the literary workshop's collaborators also dedicated a several pages to normal citizens who carried out heroic deeds or lived triumphant experiences. Much of this book reported the personal testimonies of those who worked one way or another in the search and rescue of the people who were trapped in the debris or those who were saved from it. It showed how ordinary and even marginal members of society became extraordinary in a time of tragedy. As a final note, *Nada,*

nadie is a text that has gathered numerous different voices from many distinct sectors of society, from doctors and engineers to illiterates and manual laborers, as well as various ethnic groups (ranging from Mixtecos to Chinese-Mexicans) to illustrate how the Mexico City earthquake in September, 1985 marked their life and to record their reactions in a time of crisis.

During the course of this chapter, the reader has been able to follow a brief history of the literary workshop ‘El grupo’. In doing so, it has been possible to see the origins of the ‘taller’, gain a better grasp of who its first members were, and obtain a general idea of the characteristics this group of writers possessed. This chapter was also able to focus on some of the influences that aided in molding the members of this ‘taller’. This was mostly accomplished by homing in on one of the principal mentors of the workshop’s students: Elena Poniatowska. In studying Poniatowska’s work, we were able to discuss the influence of one of her mentors (Oscar Lewis), review Poniatowska’s principal motivations (‘crear algo que ayude’), and point out some of her influences on two of her students (Silvia Molina and Rosa Nissán). This section aids in demonstrating some of the effects the ‘institucionalización multitudinaria’ of the literary workshop has brought to the contemporary writing scene in the Mexican capital by showing how they are formed and the role they play in the creation of new writers.

¹ Silvia Molina has commented on this point during an interview with Mara García: ‘MG: Últimamente ha habido una proliferación de escritoras mexicanas. ¿Es un momento propicio para que las escritoras surjan en Mexico? SM: Sí, bueno desde hace mucho tiempo. Hay muchas escritoras, y muy buenas escritoras de generaciones anteriores, y posteriores a mí, yo creo que floreció mucho la escritura de mujeres desde los sesenta con la proliferación de los talleres literarios. Son bastantes las escritoras que nos han representado a nivel internacional’ (García, M. 1999).

² The fieldwork that I speak of has mainly consisted of interviewing different members of the literary workshop previously mentioned in Mexico City and London. Moreover, I would like to thank the Graduate School and the Department of Spanish and Latin American Studies at University College London for their generous grants that made this research trip possible.

³ Alicia Trueba had her home in San Angel designed and built so as to be able to use the ground floor for the proceedings of the literary workshop. It consisted of a large rectangular room, much like a conference room, with its own private bathroom and area for serving refreshments.

⁴ In an interview between the author and Elena Poniatowska in Mexico City in June 2002, Poniatowska stated that, although she was never officially asked to leave, she left the workshop on the advice of other past teachers and colleagues approximately five years previous to the cited interview (Nathanial Gardner 'Interview with Elena Poniatowska' 25 June, 2002).

⁵ From this point onward, the acronym 'IRA' will stand for: Nathanial Gardner, 'Interview with Rodrigo Avila', 4 July, 2002

⁶ This could be seen as one of the disadvantages of the independence of 'El grupo' from the established institutions of which it once formed part (i.e. Instituto Kairos).

⁷ From this point onward the acronym 'IEP' will refer to: Nathanial Gardner, 'Interview with Elena Poniatowska' 25 June, 2002.

⁸ At this point it should be pointed out that all three of the women I interviewed who formed a part of this literary workshop referred to the members of the group as if all of the participants were female even though there were (although admittedly the minority) male members (including teachers) in the class. Phrases like *nosotras*, *todas compartimos*, when referring to a mixed female and male group were common to hear, as well as the recently invented word 'personaja' used to speak of a female character was also common parlance amongst the group's members. This appears to be an indicator of the high *femenocentric* consciousness and solidarity survive in 'El grupo'.

⁹ 'Oscar Lewis began using this last name upon entering Columbia University as a graduate student and legally changed his name in 1940, the year of his graduation. He was the only member of his family to do so' (Rigdon 1988, 15).

¹⁰ The reader interested in a more detailed account of Oscar Lewis' life, methodology and major works is directed to Susan Rigdon's study *The Cultural Façade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (1988).

¹¹ Oscar Lewis gave his clearest and most extensive definition of 'the culture of poverty' (over several pages) in the section 'The Culture of Poverty' in his Puerto Rican study *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan and New York* (1966).

¹² See also *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan and New York*, and *A Death in the Sanchez Family* (1969).

¹³ The death, wake and burial of this aunt is the subject of Lewis' book *A Death in the Sánchez Family* (1969).

¹⁴ *El niño: niños de la calle, Ciudad de México* was written in conjunction with Kent Klich, a Swedish psychologist turned photographer who spent more than ten years studying and photographing homeless children in Mexico City. In this project Klich has provided the photographs and a small, but highly significant 'declaración', whereas Elena Poniatowska has brought the children to life by writing a text based on a series of conversations with the children, as well as an epilogue that is more a formal investigative report on homeless children in Mexico City.

¹⁵ '[...] surge en cambio una literatura de la Onda que la va volando y por primera vez les da a los chavos un material de lectura muy accesible y muy inmediato y por lo tanto empieza a generarse un nuevo público lector. Esta onda la inicia en México un extraordinario narrador Mexicano, José Agustín, al publicar su primer libro: *La tumba*. [...] y según el crítico José Joaquín Blanco: 'José Agustín ayuda a los narradores mexicanos y no sólo a los menores de edad que él, a descubrir el país urbano, el sexo de los sesenta y setenta, las calles y el país actual en que se vive, en lugar de tanto realismo y/o esteticismo como se estilaba, pensando en un país anterior a los cincuenta, y muchas veces hasta anterior al siglo XX' (Poniatowska 1986b, 176-77).

¹⁶ From this point onward the acronym 'ISM' will refer to: Nathanial Gardner, 'Interview with Silvia Molina', 8 November, 2001.

¹⁷ One of those suggested changes was to gather information from a Newspaper library and create the diary at the start of the novel. Nathanial Gardner, 'Interview with Silvia Molina', 8 November, 2001.

¹⁸ 'Me dieron un premio (Villarrutia 1978), por *La mañana debe seguir gris*, y creía que no merecía ese premio porque seguía sin sentirme escritora' (Molina, *El universal* 1993b, 4).

¹⁹ Nathanial Gardner, 'Interview with Rosa Nissán', 28 June, 2002. Note that this is another instance in which one of the group's participants refers to the group as if all of its members were female (not the case).

²⁰ Nathaniel Gardner, 'Interview with Silvia Molina', 8 November, 2001. Apart from its literal meaning, 'correction', in my view, 'corrección' refers to stylistic, and thematic critique as well as the traditional editing that formed a part of the 'taller' during my attendance.

²¹ I mention here some examples of texts Elena Poniatowska created with the help of the interview. In the field of journalism, Poniatowska has published *Todo México* and *Fuerte es el silencio*. With regard to the interview and *novela testimonial*, Poniatowska's pinnacle work *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* is probably the best example. Finally, Elena Poniatowska used the interview in order to write the fictional/historical novel *Tinisima*.

²² This convinces me that 'el escarbar en el otro' is one of the principles that Elena Poniatowska uses not only in her own writing, but also in her teaching in order to assist her students in the creation of their own literary texts.

²³ *Imagen de Héctor* is a historical novel that explores the life of Silvia Molina's father, Héctor Pérez, Martínez (who died while serving as secretary to the Mexican President Miguel Alemán).

²⁴ However, Elena Poniatowska did include Rosa Nissán amongst those who received special credits for collaborating in the creation of *Nada, Nadie*. Nissán affirms she did this because 'ella es muy generosa'. (Nathaniel Gardner, 'Interview with Rosa Nissán', 28 June, 2002)

²⁵ Rosa Nissán was not the only one affected by the depressing stories told by the victims of the quake. Rosa Nissán has said that 'Elena terminó yendo a doctores porque se puso muy mal' after having been immersed for some time in the testimonies of the earthquake victims. Poniatowska herself has said that she worked on her novel *La flor de lis* as a way of escaping everything she had heard while writing *Nada, Nadie*: '*La flor de lis* también tiene un problema; es una novela muy emotiva de la cual hice la primera parte, que son ciento setenta páginas, para escapar del terremoto. Estaba rehaciendo unos artículos que publiqué en 'La Jornada' porque me pidieron que los juntara en un libro, y dije que sí a condición de que las regalías fueran para los damnificados, para la gente que había perdido sus casas... A los que perdieron a sus familias ya nadie se los podrá reponer nunca. Hice el libro y al hacerlo me empezó a entrar una gran depresión y para poder aguantar en las mañanas escribía algo más ligero, más divertido, y así salieron las primeras ciento setenta páginas de esa novela' (Laurini, 1991).

²⁶ Some of the headlines from *El Universal* on these dates read 'Negocia el gobierno suspender el pago de la deuda externa' (1 October, 1985); 'México difiere el pago de 950 millones de dólares' (2 October, 1985); 'Diferir pagos es un respiro; urge renegocia: Ip' (3 October, 1985); (Anonymous 1985, no. 24,887-24890).

²⁷ This article is found in *El Universal* 2 October, 1985 (Anonymous 1985, no. 24, 888).

²⁸ It should be noted that, though she has worked with Carlos Monsiváis on others projects –and has written about him–, the extent of his collaboration in this project is uncertain.

²⁹ In this analysis, I am limiting myself to the *El Universal*'s newspapers from the first week of October 1985 nos. 24,887 – 24,893.

Chapter Three: Elena Poniatowska

Although she is recognized as a Mexican author, Elena Poniatowska was, in fact, born in Paris, France in 1932. Her mother, Paula Amor de Poniatowska, was the daughter of wealthy Mexican landowners who lost their holding as a result of the agrarian reforms of the Lázaro Cardenas administration. Juan Evremont Poniatowska Sperry, Elena's father, was a Frenchman of Polish extraction. During Elena Poniatowska's childhood, the Second World War broke out and she and her sister, Kitzia, moved to their grandparent's house in the countryside in southern France. From there, when Elena Poniatowska was nine years old, their mother took them to Mexico to escape wartime atrocities. Later, they were reunited with their father in Mexico City where the family settled permanently.

In the Mexican capital, Elena and her sister attended a British-run private college named Windsor School where they were taught their subjects in English while continuing to speak French at home with their parents. As the girls grew up, they subsequently attended the Liceo-Franco Americano School, which, as its name suggests, was an academic institution that further honed their language skills in both French and English. Elena Poniatowska finished her formal education in a Catholic finishing school in the United States called the Sacred Heart Covenant, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, due to lack of funds, she was unable to pursue a university education in the United States and she subsequently returned to Mexico at the age of eighteen where she studied briefly to become a secretary.

Elena Poniatowska has stated that she was introduced to the world of writing quite by chance. In 1954 she interviewed the newly-appointed US ambassador to Mexico and was able to publish the interview in the well-known Mexican newspaper, *Excélsior*. Soon after, she began to work for *Excélsior* conducting daily interviews in an arrangement that lasted for approximately one year. These experiences afforded her opportunity to meet and write about many important people in Mexico at that time. After spending a year at *Excélsior*, Elena Poniatowska began to write for *Novedades*, a magazine to which she has contributed ever since, though less frequently now than previously.

Even though Elena Poniatowska claims she has never ‘felt a strong vocation for writing as a child’, and she goes as far as to say that ‘she never made a conscious decision to pursue a career as a writer’ (Jørgensen 1994, xiv), she has, without doubt, made her mark as a professional creative writer over the last few decades. Beginning in 1954 with the publication of *Lilus Kikus* (1954) (a collection of short stories), she has, (over the years) published a number of fictional works in addition to her journalism: *Méles y Teleo* (1956) (her only attempt at drama), *Los cuentos de Lilus Kikus* (1967) and *De noche vienes* (1979) (both collections of short stories), *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) (novel), *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) (testimonial), *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* (1978) (novel), *La flor de lis* (1988) (novel), *Tinísima* (1992) (novel), *El paseo de la reforma* (1996) (novel), and *La piel del cielo* (2001) (novel). At first, Poniatowska’s fictional writing took second place to her journalistic ventures, but it has gradually become more important for her and for her critics. Her fiction attained international status with the publication of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. This testimonial novel relates the life of

a largely marginalized Mexican peasant woman, and it ‘achieved increasing notoriety and a greatly expanding reading public in Mexico and abroad’ (Jørgensen 1994, xvi), winning her the Premio Mazatlán de Literatura. This novel also earned Poniatowska an honorary doctorate of ‘letras humanas’ from the University of Sinaloa in 1971 (the same year she won the Premio Xavier Villarrutia for *La noche de Tlatelolco*). Her novel *Tinísima* earned her that prestigious literary prize for the second time. Most recently, Poniatowska received the *Premio Alfaguara* for her novel, *La piel del cielo*, published in 2001.

As Elena Poniatowska’s fame as a creative writer has grown, so has the body of critical studies on her fictional works. So, in order to offer a general idea of the critical works that have been written on Elena Poniatowska’s fiction, it is important at this point to give a general review of the spectrum of these scholarly books and articles.

The critical publications on Poniatowska’s fiction are characterized by different trends. On the one hand, character analysis is by far the most common type of study carried out on Poniatowska’s narrative.¹ Her characters are seen as role models; as alternative ways of being female, they signal the denouncement of current social views, or they are seen as angels or devils. The study of Elena Poniatowska as an author who speaks for the voiceless is also a prevalent approach to her writing.² Yet another trend involves focusing on Poniatowska as an editor in order to consider the innovative ways in which she creates hybrid texts such as *La noche Tlatelolco*.³ However, while some studies to date do question Poniatowska’s role and limits as an editor, none actually considers the voice of Poniatowska’s subaltern subjects *per se*.⁴ There has, therefore, been no attempt to evaluate the projection of that voice in the context of the narratives themselves.

In addition to the articles referred to above, and in the references, it is appropriate to make mention of *The Writing of Elena Poniatowska: Engaging Dialogues* (1994), by Beth Jörgenson, which is the only book-length study of Poniatowska's writing. While Elena Poniatowska's role as a writer who 'speaks' for the marginal members of society does come into play, Jörgenson's critique employs a feminist theoretical framework to take different critical approaches to several of Poniatowska's classic texts (such as *Palabras Cruzadas*, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, and *La noche de Tlatelolco*). However, while recognizing the utility and validity of Jörgenson's work, the present thesis analyzes the texts in question from a different theoretical standpoint.

One of the frequent problems in Poniatowska's criticism concerns the question of classification. Many of her books blend techniques from both the fictional and the journalistic genres. *La noche de Tlatelolco*, for example, is primarily a testimonial/documentary book that focuses on the events surrounding the massacre of national students by Mexican soldiers in La Plaza de Las Tres Culturas shortly before the Olympic games in Aztec capital in 1968. This book contains testimonies by students and others who took part in the movement, extracts of newspaper stories and headlines, and photographs relating to the events prior to and after the massacre; it also includes poems written by important literary figures such as Octavio Paz and Rosario Castellanos. Another example is *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, a novel whose primary material was obtained via a series of interviews, and which was largely based on experiences that Josefina Bóquez relayed to Poniatowska, but which had also been presented in such a way that it appeared to be a novel narrated in the first person. Elena Poniatowska often

mixes both genres together (i.e. the testimony and fiction) to create what some critics have called hybrid texts (Jørgensen 1994, iv).

However, one common element found in all of Poniatowska's texts is her effort to unveil Mexico to her reader. Poniatowska, although born in France, considers herself a Mexican (she was officially naturalized in 1968) and her profession as a journalist has allowed her to probe the many different layers of Mexican society. She has used various techniques to do so, and this characteristic remains constant throughout her work. Her publications focus on the upper class as much as the lower classes of Mexico.

Poniatowska offers profiles of specific individuals in order to delve into the myths surrounding Mexican intellectuals like Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo, Rosario Castellanos, and Octavio Paz. On other occasions, she has used the interview format to deconstruct Mexican myths. To do so she attempted to bring them down to a more human level, or to debase them completely as occurs in her journalistic books such as *Palabras cruzadas*, in which she interviewed several important cultural figures like Diego Rivera and Alfonso Reyes. Another example of her use of this technique became evident with the seven Mexican presidential candidates she interviewed in 1976 for her book *Domingo Siete*.

However, Poniatowska's work clearly demonstrates that, in striving to show her reader 'todo México', special attention is given to the subaltern/marginal classes. She made this statement herself in *Octavio Paz: las palabras del árbol*: 'En esa época de mi vida, mi madre me dijo que yo tenía el snobismo al revés. Yo no más veía a alguien en overól y me precipitaba hacia él con los brazos abiertos' (1998, 183). This idea of 'snobismo al revés' shows Poniatowska's interest in the subaltern and the marginalized and has been the subject of journalistic writings she has published, such as, *Fuerte es el*

silencio, which exposes the poverty that exists in certain districts of Mexico City. *Todo empezó el domingo* (1997) is a *costumbrista*-type publication which documents life in Mexico City, with special emphasis on the lower social classes along with their pastimes in a series of illustrated, journalistic articles. As mentioned in the previous chapter, more recently, she has collaborated in the creation of a documentary book on homeless children in Mexico entitled *El niño: niños de la calle, Ciudad de México*. Given the above, it is perhaps surprising that a discussion on subalternity in Elena Poniatowska's writing has not often been the subject of criticism on her work, especially since her narrative that has attracted the most attention deals exclusively with a typical subaltern woman from the Mexican provinces who makes her home in the capital. Therefore, in order to remedy this lack, the present chapter focuses on three of Poniatowska's fictional novels, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, and *Gaby Brimmer* and considers their portrayal of the subaltern subject.

Bearing in mind the theoretical points brought out in chapter one, this section derives some theoretical concepts from Subaltern Studies and applies them to these three texts in that it analyzes the texts in question with respect to whether or not the subaltern's voice is present and speaks; or if, as Spivak would argue, the narratives simply pretend to represent the subaltern, but in reality are just the voice of the non-subaltern novelist.

In order to do so, three different test-cases will be presented. The first one will consider the two anthropological models Poniatowska affirmed were critical to the creation of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*: *Juan Pérez Jolote* by Ricardo Pozas and *Pedro Martínez: a Mexican Peasant and his family* by Oscar Lewis. This section will study the ways in which Poniatowska utilized these models to project her subaltern subject, and

will also comment on the ways in which she manipulated them and the main character Jesusa in the creation of her novel. This specific assessment becomes vital for our study because both Pozas and Lewis published texts designed to reveal the subaltern world to the middle and upper-classes. As anthropologists, they created and followed certain methodologies in order to execute their work. Poniatowska has conceded that, as a writer with the intention of revealing the subaltern to her readers, she allowed these social scientists' work influence her literary creation. A comparison of Poniatowska and her 'models', so to speak, aids the reader in being able to identify the manners in which, as Poniatowska has pointed out, her work differs from that of Lewis and Pozas (Poniatowska 1978, 10) as well as to analyze these modifications' impact on the subaltern's ability to obtain a degree of representation within the texts in question. The second test-case will focus on the novella, *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, looking at the ways in which she used the information from Bertram D. Wolfe's biography, *The Fabulous life of Diego Rivera*, in order to project her subaltern characters. The third and final test-case involves one of Poniatowska's most unique works, *Gaby Brimmer*. This piece of testimonial literature, which proposes to encapsulate the life of an often-ignored subaltern – the physically disabled – will be considered in the light of subaltern studies and disability studies. This chapter will analyze whether or not the subaltern has a voice in this novel as well as arguing that, at least indirectly, this narrative's protagonist can be viewed as belonging to Gaby Brimmer's contemporaries in 'La Onda' because she too exhibits narrative trends found in this literary movement. These test-cases intend to contribute to the Spivakian debate as to whether the subaltern can speak in that they compare some of the methods and sources from Anthropology, and History, which

Poniatowska has stated were crucial to the development of the first two fictional works examined. This comparison helps to extract the level of Poniatowska's voice/contribution in these books, thus allowing for a clearer view of what the subaltern's contribution is, and thereby permits us to answer the question as to whether or not the subaltern characters do speak.

The Discussion of Anthropology and *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*

Hasta no verte Jesús mío is a testimonial novel based on the life of a subaltern Mexican woman whose real name is not Jesusa Palancares, as it appears in the novel, but rather Josefina Bórquez. Elena Poniatowska met the latter during one of her visits to Mexico's National Penitentiary, Penitenciarío Lecumberri, while working as a journalist. Josefina, who lived near the correction center, was working as a cleaner in a mechanic's shop, which was also located nearby at that time. Due to her unique personality and the way she expressed herself verbally, Elena Poniatowska sought Josefina out and asked permission to interview her with the intention of writing an article about her life. Although at first Josefina was reluctant to speak with Poniatowska, over time, a long-lasting friendship was formed between them and the novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* subsequently grew out of the conversations and interviews between these two women.

Upon considering the formation of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* it is important and appropriate to analyze the models Poniatowska looked to in order to write it. One influence that she claims was decisive in the creation of her testimonial novel was that of the anthropologist Ricardo Pozas, and his book *Juan Pérez Jolote*:

Cada encuentro [entre Jesusa y Elena Poniatowska], en realidad era una larga entrevista. Me preguntaba: ‘¿Cómo le haría Ricardo Pozas con su Juan Pérez Jolote?’ y envidiaba su formación de antropólogo, su paciencia. Ese libro fue para mí definitivo [...] (Poniatowska 1994, 50)

This passage brings out the skills possessed by Pozas which Poniatowska requires for the creation of her own novel: his patience, and the academic training he had received as an anthropologist. *Juan Pérez Jolote* is the result of a researcher’s diligent work amongst the Chamula Indians in southern Mexico. Its original intent, although critics praise many of its literary qualities, was to ‘rescatar un testimonio de la convivencia humana en aquella zona indígena de México’ (Pozas 1968, 124). The book itself begins with an introduction and an explanation of the book’s contents, and in particular, it gives a brief cultural background about the indigenous group in question – the Chamula Indians - and offers a basic overview of their society and how it functions. From there, Pozas writes the life story of what he describes to be a typical man from this culture. However, it would appear that Juan – the main character – has several experiences which appear to be anything but typical.⁵ As a young boy he suffered constant physical and verbal abuse from his father, something Pozas described as uncommon amongst the Chamula Indians. His father’s violence drove him away and Juan embarked on a series of escapades that included imprisonment for a murder he did not commit and active participation in the Mexican Revolution, before he returned to his original community having by that point forgotten the greater part of his native Indian tongue and customs. Over time, he recovered his native traditions, married, became an important member of the local

government, and later worked as a Spanish teacher appointed by the Federal Mexican government. The book ended with Juan as a middle-aged man suffering from problems with alcohol abuse, but at the same time appearing to enjoy high regard within his own community.

When comparing the main characters from *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and *Juan Pérez Jolote*, it is clear they do share a few elements in common. For example, both were from the southern Mexican provinces and both came from humble beginnings. Likewise, both of their lives spanned the same basic time period and they fought in the Mexican Revolution. Apart from that, their personalities and life stories were quite different. Jesusa remained alone and for the most part anonymous, whilst leaving the Mexican province she came from and adopting an urban life style in the Mexican capital. Juan, on the other hand, returned to his home village after fighting in the Mexican Revolution and adopted his old way of life, married and had a family, obtained positions in the local government, and was generally well known and respected within his community. Therefore, apart from their contemporaneity, their participation in the Mexican Revolution and their membership of Mexican Subcultures, there is no substantial similarity between the two.

What both novels do share qualities however, is the information gathering methods employed, the narrative strategy used, and the desire to portray the subaltern's voice. Poniatowska claimed that, like Pozas, she made use of the interview format and tried to imitate his anthropological techniques in order to obtain the basic building blocks for what would later become her most famous novel. The narrative style between both books is almost identical: a single subject telling his/her life story that is later woven into

a first-person narrative telling the informant's life story, and in which the interviewer (anthropologist, writer) has made an effort to eliminate himself/herself. As an anthropologist, Pozas effectively made what has been called a 'biografía antropológica' (Portal 1975, 197). He gathered an adequate amount of biographical information on his subject and the community in which he lived in order to create a book that used a subaltern's voice to tell his life story. Poniatowska, to a certain extent, did the same; she sought out her subject, interviewed her, forged a friendship with her, and used her voice to create a book based on her life. At the same time however, there were essential differences between the two that Poniatowska herself pointed out:

Al terminar [de escribir *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*] me quedé con una sensación de pérdida; no hice visible lo esencial, no supe dar la naturaleza profunda de la Jesusa; ahora, pienso que si no lo logré es porque acumulé aventuras, pasé de una anécdota a otra, me engolosiné con su vida de pícara. Nunca la hice contestar lo que no quería. No pude adentrarme en su intimidad, no supe hacer ver aquellos momentos en que nos quedábamos las dos en silencio, casi sin pensar, en espera del milagro. Siempre tuvimos un poco de fiebre, siempre anhelamos la alucinación.

(Poniatowska 1994, 50)

Poniatowska herself recognized that she was unable to capture Jesusa's profound nature and blamed that on the fact that she was not able to penetrate her *intimidad*. Her comments seem to suggest that her lack of knowing how to ask Jesusa the right questions

left her with an inability to penetrate Jesusa's inner-self. Instead, as an author of fiction and not as an anthropologist, she created a narration of Jesusa's adventures, embellishing and inventing where she saw appropriate. As she appeared to suggest above, Poniatowska, though she claimed not to want to do so, allowed herself – as a novelist – to become so caught up in Jesusa's adventures that she found herself skimming over, so to speak, or not penetrating at all, the more profound depths of Jesusa's character.

Another important point to remember when studying Poniatowska's work is that Poniatowska has received a large part of her formal education outside Mexico (in Europe and in the United States) and she has been exposed to foreign influences within Mexico,⁶ such as that of the North-American anthropologist Oscar Lewis. When analyzing *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, it is important to look at Lewis' study: *Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family*, in order to consider the impact it would subsequently have on Poniatowska's novel. As was briefly discussed in the previous chapter, she herself has said that the time she spent working with Lewis on the aforementioned book was crucial to the creation of the novel in question: 'Lewis me pidió que lo ayudara a 'editar' *Pedro Martínez, la vida de un campesino de Tepoztlán* [...] Esta experiencia sin duda ha de haberme marcado al escribir *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*' (Poniatowska 1978, 8). Since Poniatowska pointed out that the time she spent working on Oscar Lewis' project undoubtedly influenced the creation of her novel, it will be appropriate to examine Lewis' study more closely in order to assess the differences and similarities between the two books.

As commented earlier, Oscar Lewis had a special interest in what could be considered the subaltern classes of society of Latin America and he was the first

anthropologist to describe what he has called ‘the subculture of poverty’, in which he attempted to understand the associated traits, structures and life styles of those who live in poverty.⁷ His studies have permitted him to publish various books on the Mexican Subaltern including *Five Families*, *Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family*, but by far his most renowned study on the Mexican subaltern is *The Children of Sánchez*. However, since *Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family* was more crucial to the creation of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, this is the book that will be considered in the present study. *Pedro Martínez* grew out of anthropological field research carried out by Lewis and his assistants in the Mexican town of Azteca over a period of over twenty years (from 1943 to 1963). Pedro Martínez (a pseudonym used to conceal the subject’s real identity) was suggested to Lewis as a good source of knowledge about the village Azteca and its customs. With time Pedro became one of several paid informants who worked with Lewis during his study of the village. Later, in 1944, Pedro agreed to allow Lewis and his assistants to begin a formal study of his family and, through this experience, the researchers came to know his wife, Esperanza, his six children and his grandson who lived with them (Lewis 1980, 29). Lewis went about obtaining their life story through a series of conversations, questionnaires, and systematic interviews. In addition, Lewis would spend significant amounts of time with these individuals at different work and leisure activities. However, when he began to use a tape recorder in his fieldwork, he re-interviewed Pedro and several members of the family to obtain lengthier, more detailed autobiographies in their exact words (Lewis 1980, 29). The re-interviewing process created the documents that Poniatowska edited during the time she worked for the anthropologist. The final product was what could be classified as an

anthropological or sociological study (or possibly a hybrid of both) that tells Pedro's life story as well as amplifying it by the use of other family members' points of view in order to 'illustrate some of the achievements and shortcomings of the Mexican Revolution on the village level' (Lewis 1980, 25).

Even though in the earlier stages of their life, Poniatowska's and Lewis' subjects had several elements in common, after the Revolution, the middle (and larger) portions of their lives took different courses. Jesusa, recently widowed and without children, moved to Mexico City and resided there for the rest of her life apart from brief ventures to the countryside. Pedro, however, did roughly the opposite; he moved back to his hometown of Azteca and he lived there for the rest of his life (with the exception of a short-lived business venture in the Mexican capital) with his wife and family. Their personal achievements also varied. Jesusa lived what could be described as an up-down cycle with respect to her life and work; she rose from a servant/maid, and factory worker, to hotel manager then reverted to being a factory worker and ended her life as a cleaner and a washerwoman. Although she expressed the desire to better the quality of her life, she was never really able to leave the poverty she was born into and was never able to gain a formal education or become literate. Pedro, on the other hand, underwent great changes:

Few men have undergone greater changes within a lifetime. Pedro has changed from an Indian to a *mestizo* way of life, from speaking Nahuatl to Spanish, from an illiterate to a 'half-lawyer', from a *peón* to a village politician, from a Catholic to a Seventh Day Adventist. [...] He relates more easily to others, has more friends outside the village, is more

knowledgeable, has a wider range of experience and considerable prestige in the village despite his poverty. (Lewis 1980, 26)

One of the great ironies, however, is that even though Pedro goes through many changes as a person, he himself is never able to break free from poverty and, while he does enjoy a certain status within his *barrio*, he still remains in the poorest of the poor barrios of his village at the end of his life. Neither of the characters is able to break free from their subaltern status. Additionally, both of them finish their lives the same way: alone and disillusioned with life in general. Thus, while their lives differ significantly after their participation in the Mexican Revolution, they find themselves in similar circumstances towards the end of their lives. Thus both books ultimately offer rather pessimistic views of the Mexican Revolution in particular with regard to the Mexican Subaltern.

The method used in gathering the information for Poniatowska's and Lewis' books was also similar: they both used the interview. Lewis initially took down Pedro's life story by hand, but later was able to use a tape recorder in his work. Poniatowska, on the other hand, began with the intention of recording her conversations with Bórquez; but, in the end, she was forced to take notes and to recreate those conversations after they had taken place:

Pretendí enchufar mi grabadora: casi un féretro azul marino con una bocinota como de salón de baile y Jesusa protestó: '¿Usted me va a pagar mi luz? No ¿verdad? ¿Qué no ve que me está robando la electricidad?'
[...] Entonces me puse a escribir en un cuaderno y Jesusa se mofaba de mi

letra: ‘Tantos años de estudio para salir con esos garabatos.’ Eso me sirvió porque de regreso a mi casa en la noche, reconstruía lo que me había contado. (Poniatowska 1978, 6)

Poniatowska’s lack of documentary sources, such as tape recordings, may have prompted her to publish her work as a novel instead of an anthropological or sociological document. The novel form is also a more appropriate vehicle through which to convey the individuality and strength of character of Poniatowska’s subject. Even though she possessed a significantly lower level of education than Poniatowska, she still felt at liberty to criticize her interviewer’s handwriting as well as disallowing her to use her tape-recorder. If Oscar Lewis’ subjects acted in this fashion, he did not record them as having done so. On the contrary, he described Pedro Martinez’s attitude towards him as suspicious – at least initially – though the considerably older man would later hold Lewis in high esteem. Even in his publications Lewis appeared to place himself well above his subjects.

Lewis and Poniatowska became acquainted with the person(s) the protagonist(s) of their texts were based on over a long period of time and believed they knew them intimately before they began writing. Lewis stated that Pedro: ‘has often said that we are “brothers”, and, although I am about twenty-five years his junior, he sometimes says, “You have been like a father to me”’ (Lewis 1980, 35). Even though Poniatowska has described her relationship with Jesusa Palancares as conflictive, she also writes of a strong bond of mutual friendship that evolved between the two women over the years. Nevertheless, it is important to point out some significant differences between the two

sets of relationships. In the case of Lewis' work, Pedro was a paid informant who was participating in a study on cultural values; he was required to go to Lewis' apartment in Mexico City so that the researcher could interview him in an official setting. In Poniatowska's case however, she would go to Jesusa's apartment in order to converse with her on a weekly basis and Jesusa did not benefit economically from the visits – what is more, at times she would complain that Poniatowska's visits would keep her from getting her essential work done (Poniatowska 1978, 6). In addition, as a resident of Mexico City Poniatowska, was able to maintain regular contact with her informant for the most part, whereas Lewis, was limited to summer research trips in order to work closely with his subjects.

The presentation of *Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family* and *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* have much in common. As will be discussed in greater length below, both texts are narrated in the first person and the reader is given the impression that the narrator, who is also the subject, is telling the reader the story of his/her life from the point of view of someone who is looking back over their life and recalling it for the benefit of the reader. They both follow a basic chronological order from the past to present, which – it must be supposed - is given to the reader with the help of the author, with the occasional diversion backwards or forwards (within the past) that is normal when telling one's life story. One of the main differences, though, is Lewis' incorporation of other voices in his study; specifically, other family members' testimonies. Lewis claims to have done this in order to give the reader a broader view of what happens in the family life and to establish the veracity of Pedro's life story by seeing how it compares with another family member's version of events. In *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* this practice

is not used at all. While the narrative style is almost the same, Jesusa's voice is the only one heard. One of the possible reasons for this is simple. At the time Poniatowska interviewed Josefina Bórquez, Josefina did not have any significant surviving blood relatives (in that sense, her story is that of a whole family). Josefina was orphaned at an early age and all of her brothers and sisters either died in the Mexican Revolution or disappeared from her life when she was relatively young. At the age of seventeen Josefina had become a widow without ever having children and never remarried, and that resulted in her being alone in her life – apart from the company of pets and a couple of children whom she helped to raise; children who, for the most part, were not with her for long periods of time.⁸ This made it virtually impossible for Poniatowska to include others in her narration as Lewis did.

Overall, *Pedro Martínez* is more scientific in its approach. It begins with a table of contents, a glossary and an introduction in which Lewis spells out for the reader and or student his research plan, methodology, his basic findings, his shortcomings, as well as supplying the reader with a substantial amount of background for anyone who is unfamiliar with Latin America. His book is divided up into chapters and those which come from Pedro's life are juxtaposed with chapters that give another family member's version of the same events in such a way as to allow reader to make an easy comparison. Lewis also includes an appendix that sheds further light on Pedro Martínez's life, family and village in ways that an account based wholly on an oral life story was not able to do.

Even though Poniatowska wanted to include an introduction, an explanation and even a picture of her informant, both Bórquez and Poniatowska's editor disapproved and *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* was classified as a novel (Jörgenson 1994, 59). This was rightly

so for various reasons. Elena Poniatowska's books lack several of the elements present in Lewis' book which helped make it a study rather than a novel, such as a formal thematic presentation, or an explanation of methodology, and so on.⁹

Above all, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* is a novel in which Poniatowska acknowledges that she invented parts of the story:

Utilicé las anécdotas, las ideas y muchos de los modismos de Jesusa Palancares pero no podría afirmar que el relato es una transcripción directa de su vida porque ella misma lo rechazaría. Maté a los personajes que me sobraban, eliminé cuanta sesión espiritualista pude, elaboré donde me pareció necesario, podé, cosí, remendé, inventé. (Poniatowska 1978, 10)

While Lewis surely edited, Poniatowska created *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* using some of the same tools Lewis used in *Pedro Martínez*, but at the same time she invented parts of it, so that ultimately, in the end, the two books cannot be classified in the same way: '[...] como no soy antropóloga, la mía [*Hasta no verte Jesús mío*] puede considerarse una novela testimonial y no un documento antropológico y sociológico' (Poniatowska 1978, 10). Lewis' book is more detailed, more organized, and has a wider scope, anthropologically speaking, than Poniatowska's book.

In the next part of this chapter, I wish to address the question as to whether the subaltern is able to speak in Poniatowska's novel. This novel is not purely the creation of Elena Poniatowska's imagination, but it is not strictly speaking her informant Josefina Bórquez's voice either. The subaltern's voice comes through at times as the basic

building block of the narrative, its nucleus; but this center is at times sweetened or made more palatable by Poniatowska. On some occasions Jesusa's narrative is indeed edited in order to spare the reader excessive details about her religious practices and beliefs, while on others Poniatowska simply invents using her prerogative as author: 'Muchas cosas no me las dicen en las entrevistas sino que las pongo porque me entusiasmo y las sigo haciendo' (Poniatowska 1985, 160).

It is true that Poniatowska, as an editor, chose the parts of Jesusa's discourse that form a part of the final narrative, but does that mean the sections that are included are no longer the voice of the subaltern? This chapter argues against Spivakian reductionism – and suggests the subaltern's voice is still audible in Poniatowska's text. An example from Poniatowska's own work as a writer supports the idea that the editor and the author are not one and the same. In an interview Poniatowska gave in Spain in March of 2001 with relation to her most recent novel, *La piel del cielo*, she claimed that the original manuscript was over 800 pages long, and her editor made her cut out approximately 350 pages. In this instance, no one, not even Poniatowska, argues that the editing process eliminated Poniatowska's voice. To suggest such a thing would seem almost absurd. This study also proposes that the argument that the subaltern's voice is completely eliminated whenever it is edited, altered, or partially recreated – namely, Spivak's thesis - is also untenable.

In order to assess the question as to whether the subaltern speaks in Poniatowska's text, it is important to review the various literary techniques used to recreate Jesusa's personality. Elena Poniatowska wrote *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* using the first person. Jesusa, the narrator, constantly reminded the reader that she was telling a

story each time she brought the reader back to the present with new insights on the past. The following quote illustrates the oscillating movement of the text:

Esos zapatos me los mandó hacer mi papá con los zapateros de Acapulco, zapato negro, zapato café y mis medias. Toda la vida se usaron medias; ahora es cuando andan con las piernas encueradas y el fundillo de fuera, pero antes los niños chiquitos de un año llevaban medias, nadie traía las piernas pelonas. (Poniatowska 1984, 66)

Jesusa interrupted the narrative to describe (to the reader) the way she used to dress in the past, while contrasting it with present-day practices. Another way in which this narration of recorded memories was different from other life histories was the lack of wondering about the future. Jesusa did not focus on the future but rather only on the past and occasionally on the moment in which she is narrating.

There is one obvious explanation for these techniques. The real-life narrator in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* was elderly and was looking back on her life, and therefore knew the story-line up to the present, but did not know the future. Another, less considered, although not necessarily less hidden, explanation for the construction of this narration can be seen in the author-narrator interface. Poniatowska is the author of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, rather than its narrator. Unlike narratives on personal experience and memories, Poniatowska is limited to what her informant allows her to know in order to create her own narration. Poniatowska herself said that, on occasions, Jesusa only spoke of things that did not fit Poniatowska's needs: 'Había miércoles en que Jesusa no

hablaba sino de sus obsesiones del momento; la alcantarilla tapada, por ejemplo [...]’ (Poniatowska 1978, 10). This demonstrates at least one of the limitations which non-subaltern authors face when they write about the subaltern: the difficulty of going further than the subaltern will allow them. This could account for Poniatowska’s ability simply to recall the past, and not relive it, in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*: since only Jesusa recalls the things which have happened to her. At the same time however, Poniatowska possessed one of the skills that her informant does not appear to have: the ability to take her story, and edit it in order to produce a ‘novela que constituye una crónica fascinante del acontecer histórico del México contemporáneo’ (Poniatowska 1984, 314).

In the next part of the analysis of whether or not the subaltern is speaking in Elena Poniatowska’s novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, it is important to consider what elements of the subaltern speech and reality are suppressed. This will help to open a dialogue on just how much Poniatowska’s and Josefina Bórquez’s respective voices are heard in this novel. In order to do so, the section that follows will consider and offer some answers to the following question. Which elements of Josefina Bórquez’s testimony were suppressed in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*? Moreover, this section will offer possible answers as to why Poniatowska suppressed the parts that she did.

In 1994 Poniatowska published an article entitled ‘La vida y muerte de Jesusa’¹⁰ that discussed and expanded upon several aspects of Bórquez’s life that do not appear in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. This article raised some issues about Josefina Bórquez and Jesusa Palancares in a way which is similar to Oscar Lewis’ introductions to his anthropological studies. This article sheds light on those elements of Josefina Bórquez, her life and her relationship with Poniatowska that the latter’s novel had suppressed. One

of those elements was the actual conditions in which she lived: 'la barriada', her own apartment, and the surrounding neighborhood that formed a part of Bórquez's tangible environment. The physical poverty in which Josefina Bórquez lived during the time both women knew each other received little, if any, mention in Poniatowska's novel. This apartment she lived in - full of animals, humidity, *tichiliches*, and lacking light and air - was reduced to a room in a *vecindad* where she simply ate and slept in the fictionalized version. Another tangible aspect of the Josefina's life that Poniatowska did not include in her novel was Bórquez's employment in *Impresora Galve en San Antonio Abad* (Poniatowska 1994, 57) where she worked as a cleaner.¹¹ Towards the end of the novel, Jesusa works washing clothes full-time (Poniatowska 1984, 293), whereas Bórquez only washed the clothes for some of the workers at the *Impresora* in order to supplement her income (Poniatowska 1994, 38). The occupation of washerwoman is the one Poniatowska chooses to underline as Jesusa's occupation during the latter part of her fictional narrative. The author offers no definitive reason as to why she has done so, but it is possible that the office of *lavandera* conformed more readily to the stereotype of a downtrodden, despicable job that would emphasize the decadence of the character, Jesusa, in the novel more than that of a cleaner in a print shop would.

However, physical elements are not the only component of Jesusa's life that did not appear in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. Topics of conversation were also excluded (if not in whole at least in part) from the novel. In an interview, Poniatowska explains that Josefina would bring up several subjects repeatedly:

Ella hablaba mucho de su situación actual, de lo mal que estaba su vivienda, de la gente en la vecindad, de lo mal que estaba el país, era una visión muy pesimista. De a dónde íbamos a dar, que la comida era pésima, que la leche tenía agua, que las tortillas tenían papel periódico, que el pan costaba demasiado caro. Eso era una cosa que ella repetía mucho, mucho mucho. Y claro que yo se lo quité, porque el estar hablando todo el tiempo de eso.... Para ella la novela habría sido sólo el espiritualismo, la carestía y la mala situación actual. (Steele 1992, 161)

This passage indicates that not every interview produced anecdotes or adventures of the kind which inform Jesusa's 'novelistic' existence. On the contrary, in the quote above, Poniatowska gives the reader the impression that, often, Bórquez's conversations revolved around subjects that would be of little interest, if not annoying or tiresome, to many readers. Indeed, the monotonous condition of Bórquez's subaltern life is eliminated from the novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* – and probably rightly so since its inclusion might have meant commercial suicide for a fictional narrative. Nonetheless, expediency does not detract from the fact that the problems Bórquez would mention to Poniatowska formed a substantial part of this particular subaltern's daily life.

The author herself is subject to the most significant act of editorial suppression in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. Elena Poniatowska, the friend, the journalist, the writer, the interviewer, the aspiring anthropologist, who spent every Wednesday afternoon with Bórquez for several years before publishing the novel (not to mention the fifteen years plus years of friendship that they shared afterwards) did not appear except as a second-

person reference 'usted' in a few isolated instances. This was very unlike her testimonial documentary piece in *Fuerte es el silencio* in which a character named 'Elena' actively interviews Florencio Medrano, a popular leader of a group of lower-class citizens in southern Mexico who helped this particular group of poverty-stricken people to take land owned by the government and founded a colony on it (Poniatowska 1991b, 245-71). With Bórquez it was another case altogether; Poniatowska did her best to hide her presence and her role as writer and editor and to allow Jesusa to tell her story. Was this an editorial strategy or an attempt to deceive the reader, we may ask? The effect this technique had on the narrative was to make it appear to the reader that Bórquez was speaking to the reader as Jesusa without mediation. The dialogue, although highly colloquial, was clear, understandable, and entertaining. Certainly, while it is difficult to argue that Bórquez's life is not interesting, it is clear, nevertheless, that this narrative is **not** representative of the standard dialogues that Poniatowska described in the quote cited earlier, which emphasized the monotony of Bórquez's conversations. Poniatowska's elimination of herself also silences her own agency while searching for those interesting moments in Bórquez's life that would later serve to garnish the novel. At the same time that Poniatowska eliminated herself she also suppressed the questions that Bórquez did not want to answer (Poniatowska 1994, 50). By doing this Poniatowska not only erased the silences, but also the exercising of the subaltern's agency: those moments when Bórquez uses her own will to limit the content of the novel. This point emphasizes Bórquez's role in the limitations placed on the novel's contents. Since the book was based on her own life, the informant inevitably exercised a certain degree of control over what went into it. If Bórquez did not want to share something or if she told something in a particular way,

she in effect changed its perception or meaning. Put briefly, the interviewee modified Poniatowska's raw material. Thus, there clearly were moments in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* when the subaltern did not speak – but as a result of self-imposed silence rather than of an erasure created by a dominant force – the author in this instance.

Another important aspect of Bórquez's life that Poniatowska readily admitted to playing down (but not eliminating completely) was *La Obra Espiritual*.¹² At one time for Bórquez, 'en los años cuarenta, la Obra Espiritual fue lo único que le daba sentido a su vida' (Poniatowska 1994, 72). None the less, even though Poniatowska began her novel with one of Jesusa's spiritual sessions (thus possibly pointing to the importance of this element) she quickly abandoned this topic to tell of Jesusa's life when she was a little girl in Oaxaca and did not pick up this leitmotiv again until the end of the book. Even at that point she appears to give most emphasis to Jesusa's leaving the religion due to her mistreatment at the hands of other 'priestess'. Part of the reason as to why Poniatowska chose not to emphasize this aspect of Jesusa's life was most likely due to the fact that she had some difficulties in understanding the doctrine, which was even noted by Bórquez herself:

La obra espiritual siempre me resultó oscura, a veces incomprensible y Jesusa se disgustaba cuando yo le hacía repetir algún postulado: 'Pues, ¿qué no ya se lo platicué? ¡Cuántas veces voy a tener que contárselo!'

(Poniatowska 1994, 70)

As an experienced journalist and professional writer, it should not seem surprising that Poniatowska would include very little of what she herself had difficulties grasping – much less others whose experience with that world would probably be even less extensive. However, learning about the *Obra Espiritual* was not the only time when Bórquez told Poniatowska that she was not capable of understanding Bórquez's world. In the article previously mentioned, Poniatowska told of another occasion when Bórquez accentuated the author's lack of understanding of the subaltern's world:

Un miércoles encontré a la Jesusa envuelta en un sarape chillón, rojo, amarillo, verde perico, de grandes rayas escandalosas, acostada en su cama. Se levantó para abrirme y volvió a tenderse bajo el sarape, tapada toda hasta la cabeza. [...] Miré el gran sarape de Saltillo que no conocía y me senté en una pequeña silla a los pies de la cama. Jesusa no decía una sola palabra. Hasta el radio, que permanecía prendido durante nuestras conversaciones, estaba apagado. Esperé algo así como media hora en la oscuridad. De vez en cuando le preguntaba:

- Jesusa ¿se siente mal?

No hubo respuesta.

- Jesu ¿no quiere hablar?

No se movía.

-¿Está enojada?

Silencio total.

Decidí ser paciente. Muchas veces, al iniciar nuestras entrevistas, Jesusa estaba de mal humor. Después de un tiempo se componía, pero no perdía su actitud gruñona y su gran dosis de desdén.

-¿Ha estado enferma? ¿No ha ido al trabajo?

-No.

-¿Por qué?

-Hace quince días que no voy.

De nuevo nos quedamos en el silencio más absoluto. Ni siquiera se oía el piar de sus pájaros que siempre se hacía presente con una leve y humilde advertencia de que aquí estoy, bajo los trapos con los que cubría la jaula.

Esperé mucho rato desanimada, cayó la tarde, seguí esperando, el cielo se puso lila. Con cuidado, volví a la carga:

-¿No me va a hablar?

No contestó.

-¿Quiere que me vaya?

Entonces hizo descender el sarape a la altura de sus ojos, luego de su boca, y espetó:

-Mire, usted tiene dos años de venir y estar chingue y chingue y no entiende nada. Así es que mejor aquí le paramos. (Poniatowska 1994, 41)

This, however, is not the only time Poniatowska admitted that Josefina accused her of not being able to understand this subaltern woman's life, nor was it the only aspect of Bórquez's life that her informant claimed Poniatowska was not able to understand.

Poniatowska discloses to her readers that, on occasions, since she was not recording the conversations the two women were having, she would later return to Bórquez's house to fill in information that she had forgotten while trying to write down their conversation. She would respond: 'Pues, ¿qué eso no se lo conté la semana pasada?' (Poniatowska 1994, 40). The same would happen when Poniatowska would ask her to repeat some fundamental principal from the *Obra Espiritual* (an aspect of Jesusa's life that the author found to be 'oscura' and 'a veces incomprensible' [Poniatowska 1994, 70]): 'Pues ¿qué no ya se lo platiqué? ¡Cuántas veces voy a tener que contárselo!' (Poniatowska 1994, 70). Here in these two instances, (one of which was previously mentioned) the phrases appear quite similar but they refer to two different types of lack of understanding. In the first instance the reference is to the author's imperfect memory (but, really, who is able to remember conversations down to the last detail?). The second phrase appears to point to what Bórquez perceived to be a more fundamental lack of understanding: a certain inability to comprehend aspects of the subaltern realm which she inhabited.

Poniatowska's difficulties in penetrating and appreciating the *Obra Espiritual*, to which she openly admits, demonstrates the existence of a gap between the two women. Bórquez underlines that breach on other occasions, especially when Poniatowska appears to try to break up her routine or introduce her to new activities:

En diversas ocasiones intenté sacarla:

-Vamos al cine, Jesusa.

-No, porque no veo bien... Antes sí me gustaban las episodios, las de Lon Chaney.

-Entonces vamos a dar una vuelta.

-¿Y el quehacer? *Cómo se nota que usted no tiene quehacer.*

[...] Le sugerí un viaje al Istmo de Tehuantepece para ver de nuevo su tierra, cosa que creí le agradaría [...]

-*Lárguese. Usted qué entiende.* Lárguese le digo. Déjeme en paz.

(Poniatowska 1994, 46 [emphasis added])

With each different activity Poniatowska suggested, Bórquez emphasized the differences between the two women and the way their lives are structured even to the point that she became violent in her refusal to go along with Poniatowska's suggestions. These examples clearly demonstrate that there were, indeed, times when Bórquez did not feel Poniatowska comprehended her. This surely had an effect on the novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and its ability to allow the subaltern to speak. Aside from a difference in actual age, there were other physical aspects of a failure to comprehend that have practical explanations (Poniatowska, like almost everyone, did not have a perfect memory) and that clearly changed the way the written text was presented:

En su voz oía yo la voz de la nana que me enseñó español, la de todas las criadas que pasaron por mi casa [...] Estas y otras voces de mujeres hacían coro a la voz principal: la de Jesusa Palancares y creo que por esto en mi texto hay palabras, modismos y dichos, mucho dichos, no sólo de Oaxaca, el estado de Jesusa, sino de la república entera, de Jalisco, de Guerrero, de la sierra de Puebla, del Distrito Federal. (Poniatowska 1978, 10)

So, in a very physical way, because Poniatowska was forced to recreate Bórquez's voice from memory this contributed to its own erasure and replacement with other subaltern women's speech from other regions of Mexico, though it should be noted that these women were also from Mexico's subaltern sectors of society. However, in addition to these kinds of misrepresentations in the text, there are other cultural gaps between these two Mexican women that limit the subaltern's ability to speak. One example of this, which has already been mentioned, is Poniatowska's consistent editorializing and reduction of anything relating to the *Obra Espiritual* in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*.

When considering whether or not the subaltern, Josefina Bórquez, was able to speak in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, the question of whether Poniatowska could comprehend and or understand Bórquez's world or not is of vital importance because if Poniatowska does not understand the subaltern's social milieu then representing her in the novel becomes difficult, if not impossible. The extent to which Bórquez felt she was understood by Poniatowska is a difficult question to answer. That is because, besides being conflictive (Poniatowska 1985, 158) Bórquez would also contradict herself. For example, if at first she did not accept the novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, later her attitude changed: 'al verlo me pidió veinte ejemplares que regaló a los muchachos del taller para que supieran cómo había sido su vida, los muchos precipicios que ella había atravesado y se dieran una idea de lo que era la Revolución [Mexicana]' (Poniatowska 1994, 52). So while on the one hand, she rejected the novel at one point, on another occasion she accepted it as a legitimate story about her life. Both instances are important factors to bear in mind when assessing Bórquez's skepticism towards Poniatowska's

version of her life, which she has dismissed as fictitious. The informant Bórquez, indeed, epitomizes the unreliable narrator.

It is essential to remember that, although *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* is a book which was written by a bourgeois woman whose normal daily routine – as she readily admits¹³ - had little in common with Jesusa's, it is nonetheless focused entirely on a subaltern subject and her life. It does not focus on or integrate people from the middle or upper classes, except in a superficial sense (i.e. landlords, work bosses, and army leaders) since these characters are needed in order to advance the story-line in a realistic manner.¹⁴ None the less, that does not take away from the fact that while Poniatowska did polish and fictionalized Bórquez's account – most likely in order to make it more palatable and interesting to the reader - she did not turn it into a *telenovela*.¹⁵ Jesusa did not win the lottery, nor did she meet a rich man who saved her from poverty, nor did she go back to school and earn a degree. Poniatowska's account does not convert Jesusa into a bourgeoisie or oblige her to move within élite social circles (or even middle-class social circles). The character has several adventures, the majority of which she lived while she was still young, meets some interesting characters but, most of all, demonstrated through her words and deeds the unique characteristics she possessed as a Mexican woman. This was what Poniatowska wanted to do with the character: 'Pretendí hacer hincapié en las cualidades personales de la Jesusa, aquello que la diferencia de la imagen tradicional de la mujer mexicana, sus inconformismos, su independencia [...]' (Poniatowska 1994, 55). Poniatowska was consistently drawn to the real-life character, the model for Jesusa. This author did use Bórquez for her own purposes, but at the same time Josefina 'no siempre se deja' and exercised her only real control: her own silence.

History and *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*

In 1978, nine years after publishing *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, Elena Ponitowska published *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*. This book is a far cry from the Pozas and Lewis-inspired novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. Nevertheless, this short novel (only 72 pages in popular editions) is a collection of twelve letters that brings to light another class of subaltern, namely, the individual who has been subalternized by immigration and who is trying to belong in a place and society that is not her own by birth.

Querido Diego te abraza Quiela is a novella reputedly based on a series of letters that the Russian Painter, Angelina Beloff (b.1879), wrote to the famous Mexican muralist Diego Rivera (b.1886). This woman was to be Diego's first serious and long-lasting sentimental partner. A mutual friend, Maria Blanchard, introduced the couple to each other in 1909 in Belgium (Debriose 1989, 72). After their initial acquaintance, they traveled with other painters to London together, where Diego Rivera declared his love for Angelina. Beloff, unsure of her feelings, made no formal commitment at that time and shortly afterwards returned to Paris alone (Beloff 1986, 32). However, they kept in contact and, in 1911, they were reunited in Paris, and married in June of the same year (Debriose 1989, 73). For the next ten years (1911-1921), Angelina and Diego lived together in the artisan borough of Monparnasse, Paris, while Diego studied painting (Wolfe 1968, 69). However, Diego receipt of a telegram from his family warning him that his father was close to death marked the end of their time together; he sold most of his personal belongings and left Angelina in Paris while he returned to Mexico where he would live for the remainder of his life without her (Wolfe 1968, 115).¹⁶ Angelina's letters that his biographer, Bertram D. Wolfe, retrieved from Diego's personal files were

written after Diego had left Paris for Mexico (from 1922 forward) and span the couple's personal and combined past, present and future. In most of her letters Angelina recounts her experiences with Diego in Paris (such as the birth of their son Dieguito in 1916 and his subsequent death fourteen months later [Debroise 1989, 74]) and other parts of Europe, telling him about her present situation in the French capital. Other letters elaborating on Angelina's hopes of reuniting with Diego in Mexico at some time in the future. Although they never do reunite as a couple again, Angelina did eventually immigrate to Mexico several years after Diego departed Paris where both led their separate lives as artists in the Mexican capital (Debroise 1989, 74-75).

One of the keys to understanding *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* is found in a postscript, which appears on the very last page. There Poniatowska explains to the reader that the novel itself is based on actual letters written by the real Angelina Beloff to Diego Rivera, all documented in Bertram D. Wolfe's book *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (1968). A careful examination of Wolfe's book and Poniatowska's novella confirms that Poniatowska has been, in some aspects, highly faithful in following the information and letters revealed in Wolfe's biography. So Poniatowska's text is somewhat of a hybrid that combines her narrative skills and the historical information found in Wolfe's study. What both Wolfe's study and Poniatowska's narrative display is the world of a Russian immigrant (Angelina) who is trying to find a place for herself as a painter in Paris and who is trying to understand her relationship with Diego Rivera.

However, whereas on the one hand Elena Poniatowska is faithful to the historical account provided by Wolfe, there are other ways in which she goes beyond the factual information he provides. This element is especially true with respect to the unfavorable

characterization of Diego Rivera and his actions in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*. In addition, there are also elements of this novella that are contradicted by another historical account that was given by Angelina Beloff herself in her autobiographical book *Memorias: Angelina Beloff*. This study will help to underline those differences, lest the reader believe that this novel is purely historical, and offer some explanation as to why they exist.

A quote from an interview given by Poniatowska in Spain after winning the *Premio Alfaguara* in the Spring of 2001 offers one of the possible reasons for the negative image of Diego Rivera found in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, and, specifically, the author's failure to include historical facts that might have served to redeem Rivera:

- [Entrevistador] Usted misma contó que en el año 1953, cuando se inicia en el periodismo, realizó 365 entrevistas, una diaria. Era muy joven y le preguntó al pintor y muralista Diego Rivera si los dientes que había pintado eran de leche, y él le respondió: 'Sí, y con ellos me como a las niñas.'
- [Poniatowska] Yo empecé con mucha pasión haciendo periodismo, pero a veces no sabía a quién entrevistaba ni qué había hecho la gente entrevistada por mí. Había estudiado en un convento de monjas en Estados Unidos, venía de ahí, y fue eso lo que me impresionó de Diego Rivera, porque nunca había visto una pintura suya. Además, en mi familia, a

Diego Rivera lo consideraban un enemigo, porque había pintado desnuda a Pita (Guadalupe Amor), que es mi tía. Entonces, siempre hacían una gran tragedia de esta historia en mi casa. (Roffé 2001, 173)

This quote clearly suggests that Elena Poniatowska had a political/personal agenda when creating the narrative in question. The fact that Diego Rivera was considered an enemy to Poniatowska's family is a plausible reason for her decision not to include historical facts that might have redeemed his portrayal in the novel. Knowing this circumstantial information and comparing Poniatowska's novella to historical data allows us more effectively to ask of the text the following questions: whose voice is heard in this narrative? Elena Poniatowska's or that of various historical figures?

The letters that make up *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* can be divided into three categories: those recalling Diego and Angelina's past life together, the present condition in which Angelina lives, and Angelina's hopes for a future life in Mexico with Diego. These three parts reveal information about the subalternity of Angelina's life, but perhaps the present is the dimension that reveals the most about this woman's subaltern condition. Angelina was marginalized in many ways, firstly because she was an immigrant in France at a time when immigrants were not well received:

[...] me golpea [Diego] tu recuerdo y ya no puedo caminar y algo me duele tanto que tengo que recargarme contra la pared. El otro día un gendarme se acercó: 'Madame, vous êtes malade?' Moví de un lado a otro la cabeza, iba a responderles que era el amor, ya lo ves, soy rusa, soy

sentimental y soy mujer, pero pensé que mi acento me delataría y los funcionarios franceses no quieren a los extranjeros. (Poniatowska 1991a, 13-14)

In this text the negative attitude of the French towards foreigners at that time had pushed Angelina into a society of foreigners. All of the major characters represented in the novel were also immigrants - Russians, Spaniards, Mexicans, and others - none of whom appear to have been integrated into French society. They formed a sort of sub-world made up of artists eking out a bohemian-like existence at that time. Yet, at times, Angelina wished, at least in part, to be assimilated into society at large. These desires were most often expressed when she made reference to her deceased son 'Dieguito':

Ahora todo ha cambiado y veo con tristeza a los niños que cruzan la calle para ir a la escuela. No son dibujos, son niños de carne y hueso. Me pregunto si irán suficientemente cubiertos, si dentro de la mochila su madre puso un *goûter* alimenticio, quizá *un petit pain au chocolat*. Pienso que uno de ellos podría ser nuestro hijo, y siento que daría no se [sic] qué, mi oficio, mi vida de pintora por verlo así con su *tablier d'écolier* a cuadritos blancos y azules, haberlo vestido yo misma, pasando el peine entre sus cabellos, recomendado que no se llene los dedos de tinta, que no rompa su uniforme, que no ... en fin todo lo que hacen las madres dichas que a esta hora en todas las casas de París aguardan a sus hijos para tomarlos entre sus brazos. (Poniatowska 1991, 39)

This quote reveals the protagonist's view that her defunct son was a possible means of escaping her marginalization that was lost in his passing. The peppering of the highly reflexive passage with French vocabulary also hints at her desire to form a part of the larger French world around her. Likewise, details of this kind draw the reader into Angelina's world, eliciting sympathy for her plight (and, by extension, some hostility towards Rivera).

One other aspect of her subaltern life as a painter in Paris is her location on the economic margins of society without access to an adequate income. Angelina constantly wrote to Diego about the financial hardships she went through while she attempted to make a living in Paris:

Gracias a Monsieur Vicent tendré con qué comprar carbón, cuatro o cinco papas pesarán en mi *filet à provisions*. En estos últimos meses mis finanzas se deterioraron tanto que asistí a la Pascua Rusa sólo por los huevos duros y el enorme pan que reparten. [...] Así, llegué a la casa con un gran pan y cuatro huevos duros, lo suficiente para alimentarme durante cuatro días. (Ponitawska 1991, 28-29)

In subsequent letters, Angelina admits that the money Diego had been sending was her means of sustenance since she still had not been able to find a job that allowed her to work and paint.

However, one of the most recognizable themes of the subaltern's life in Paris is solitude. Diego was consistently portrayed as the major cause of this state of affairs. Firstly, there is the fact that Diego has abandoned Angelina. Another factor that exacerbates Angelina's loneliness was her son's death, and to make matters worse, Diego would never allow her to have another child. Another less obvious reason for Angelina's loneliness is Diego's failure to communicate with her. Because he did not write to Angelina, some of their mutual friends feel awkward approaching her since they do not know how to respond to or explain Diego's silence, thus further marginalizing Angelina.

Querido Diego te abraza Quiela is similar to *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* in that it is narrated in the first person in which Poniatowska: '[...] pone un cauce para que hable [el subalterno] [...]' (Mora 2001, 2). At the same time, however, they are different for the following reasons. As mentioned above, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* is a novel created through a series of interviews and a friendship between Poniatowska and the subaltern woman, Josefina Bórquez. There was ample opportunity to obtain 'materia prima' from Josefina during their extended friendship. In the case of *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, Poniatowska was limited to Wolfe's description of Diego Rivera's life in Paris with Angelina, and the quotes he included from the letters Angelina wrote to Diego. This is accounted for to some extent in the different lengths of both novels. *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* is 303 pages long in most prints, whilst *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* is only 73 pages (and only because it has been stretched out to that length due to its fairly large print size on small pages).¹⁷ Nonetheless, the chapter on Angelina in Wolfe's biography is only seven pages long, so Poniatowska clearly invented a fairly substantial portion of what is found in her novella. Even more so than in the previous novel, it was necessary for her to

invent the subaltern's voice and or environment in the new novel. So an obvious question is: Why did she invent so much of the content of this novel? The next section of this chapter addresses the question of the extent to which Poniatowska's recreation of the failed relationship between Angelina and Rivera has been manipulated to serve her own artistic purposes.

One of the main reasons Poniatowska wrote this novel is because of the personal affinities she felt she shared with Angelina. In an article published in 1986 in the *Texas Observer*, Poniatowska revealed that she felt she was able to identify with Angelina:

I read as far as the chapter on Angelina Beloff, and there I could go no further. I so much identified with her... after reading a letter in the chapter, from Angelina to Diego, I started to write Angelina's letter to Diego, letters that were based on the historical facts that Bertram Wolfe included in this chapter. (Poniatowska 1986, 28)

As stated here, Poniatowska felt the need to recreate Angelina's voice because she believed she was able to understand the Russian painter's situation. Indeed, both women have many things in common. They are of European origin, Poniatowska from France and Angelina from Russia. Both have worked as artists, Angelina as a painter and Elena as a writer. The greatest similarity, however, is in the fact that both immigrated to Mexico and have, at one point or another in their lives, desired to be integrated into Mexican society. Angelina expresses this desire in her letter published in Wolfe's biography:

Look, Diego, during so many years that we were together, my character, my habits – in short, all of me, was completely modified; I have become terribly ‘Mexicanized’, I have become attached ‘par procuration’ to your language, to your country, to a thousand little things, and it seems to me that I will feel considerably less foreign with you than in any other land whatsoever. (Wolfe 1968, 125).

Poniatowska reproduced the fragment quoted above almost word for word in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* using Angelina’s letters found in Wolfe’s biography. Although Poniatowska does not mention this in her novella, Angelina did eventually go to Mexico and work there as an art teacher for the remainder of her life – although not with Diego Rivera. These sentiments were not too far from Poniatowska’s personal life: in an article she wrote, Poniatowska confessed to having experienced a similar desire to belong to Mexican society:

Lo que crecía o a lo mejor estaba allí desde hace años era el ser mexicana; el hacerme mexicana; sentir que México estaba dentro de mí [...] Yo ya no era la niña de ocho años que vino en un barco de refugiados ‘Marqués de Comillas’, hija de eternos ausentes, de viajeros de transatlántico, hija de barcos, hija de trenes, sino que México estaba dentro, era un animalote adentro (como Jesusa llamaba a la grabadora), un animal fuerte, lozano, que se engradecía hasta ocupar todo lugar. [...] Mis abuelos, mis tatarabuelos tenían una frase clave: ‘I don’t belong’. Una noche, antes de

que viniera el sueño, después de identificarme largamente con la Jesusa y repasar una a una todas sus imágenes, pude decirme en voz baja: ‘Yo sí pertenezco.’ (Poniatowska 1978, 8)

Bearing these two quotes in mind, it is not surprising then that Poniatowska felt able to identify so well with Angelina Beloff and thus feel as if she could recreate her thoughts and feelings. Both women were foreigners of European origin desiring to belong to the country of their husbands.

Several years after Poniatowska admitted that she felt that she could identify with Angelina and her feelings, she explained that writing Angelina’s story aided her on a personal level. She used it as what could be called a cathartic experience to deal with events in her own life. In her own words: ‘Bueno, en realidad, las cartas a Diego Rivera fueron un pretexto. Yo en esa época me sentía muy sola y abandonada, tenía problemas en mi matrimonio, entonces detrás de Angelina Beloff me escudé para escribir esas cartas [...]’ (Vega 1993, 26). Poniatowska felt that this narrative, a somewhat sad and melancholic love story based on real historical events, was a way in which she could express some of her own feelings while masking them behind someone else’s persona. Poniatowska’s novella may be seen as a contribution to Mexican history but her reasons for writing it appear to be personal.

Another possible reason why Elena Poniatowska felt comfortable enough to recreate Angelina Beloff’s voice in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* is simply because she had access to Bertram D. Wolfe’s biography of Diego Rivera, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*. On several occasions, Diego Rivera himself referred to Wolfe as his

biographer. Wolfe has written four books on Diego Rivera: *Portrait of America* (1923), *Portrait of Mexico* (1936), *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times* (1939), and *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, (1963). The second publication mentioned, *Diego Rivera his Life and Times*, is considered to be Rivera's 'authorized biography', although Wolfe described his final biography on Diego Rivera, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, as simply an extension of his first work, which included Diego's life from 1939- 1957 (Wolfe 1968, 8-9). As an official biographer, Bertram Wolfe had full access to Rivera's personal papers and documents, and had conducted extensive interviews and conversations with the artist and with Angelina - who by that time was living in Mexico. He was able to supply the quotes from Angelina's original letters and possessed much of the detail relating to the lives of Angelina and Diego in Paris. Poniatowska herself admitted to having drawn on the book in order to create her novella: 'Bertram Wolfe, a quien estas cartas [la novela] le deben mucho de su información, consigna en *La fabulosa vida de Diego Rivera* [...]' (Poniatowska 1991a, 72). Perhaps she believed that by making use of a historical source that drew on so many first-hand resources, gave her the confidence she needed to provide the extra details herself.

While in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* Poniatowska did create a chronological order for the letters Wolfe included in his book,¹⁸ a comparison between the content of both books shows that Elena Poniatowska used extensively the information found in Wolfe's book in order to create her own version of events. For example, Poniatowska employed Angelina's historical pet name 'Quiela' in order to sign each one of the letters she recreates (Wolfe 1968, 124 and Poniatowska 1991a, 10). This decision to follow Wolfe's historical information, as Poniatowska later confessed in an interview, resulted

in occasional inaccuracies. For example, Poniatowska later discovered that Wolfe had been wrong and that Rivera had actually called his Russian wife ‘Gela’ – a shortened form of Angelina – instead of Quiela (IEP). In this specific case, Poniatowska’s loyalty to information Wolfe provided actually distanced her own work from the historical truth.

The uncovering of this snippet of literary history allows for a brief, but pertinent comment with regard to the subjective nature of the narration of history itself. Hayden White has clearly pointed out:

Recent theories of discourse, however, dissolve the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses based on the presumption of an ontological difference between their respective referents, real and imaginary, in favor of stressing their common aspect as semiological apparatuses that produce meaning by the systematic substitution of signifieds (conceptual contents) for the extra-discursive entities that serve as their referents. (White 1990, x)

The narrative discourse employed by Wolfe (and other historians) is subject to the same frailties (one of those being what the author *chooses* to emphasize in his/her writings), which can be found in the narrative Poniatowska created. So, while it is important to distinguish between biography and narrative, biography as the previous example underlines, must not be viewed as infallible truth.

Poniatowska mentioned many of the people and situations found in Wolfe’s biography in the reconstruction of the memories, as when, during the hard times of the

post-war era, Angelina and Diego would get together with friends and an artist who had been fortunate enough to have received some money from selling a painting or receiving a remittance would invite the others to eat (Wolfe 1968, 96-97 and Poniatowska 1991a, 57). Another way in which Poniatowska draws on Wolfe's biography is in her description of Angelina Beloff. Early on in his biography Wolfe describes Angelina Beloff and compares her to a blue bird:

Blue eyes, light sky-blue. Blue jersey or smock, blue suit of trim, resolute lines, covered a slender, not unfeminine figure. Gómez de la Serna fancied that he detected an enveloping blueness all around her. Birdlike in her movements and lightness, in the poise of her head slightly tilted to one side when she was lost in contemplation, [...] birdlike in the thin, reedy, chirping note of her high monotoned voice [...] Angelina was nicknamed 'bluebird' by Gómez de la Serna. (Wolfe 1968, 68)

Poniatowska took this idea of blueness and incorporated it in her novella to the point that it almost became a leitmotiv. Of the twelve letters that make up *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*, six of them contain references to the color blue. Sometimes they are used to describe Angelina '[la] dulce envuelta en una leve azulosidad!' (Poniatowska 1991a, 68), other times Poniatowska played with the bluebird description that appeared in Wolfe's book:

Diego. Sigo siendo tu pájaro azul, sigo siendo simplemente azul como solías llamarme, ladeo la cabeza herida definitivamente y la pongo sobre tu hombro y te beso en el cuello, Diego, Diego, Diego a quién tanto amo. (Poniatowska 1991a, 68)

Poniatowska did not limit her use of the color blue to the descriptions of Angelina. She also used it to describe the way Angelina paints: '[...] no puedo dislocar las líneas rectas como lo hacía antes, las mantengo y todo lo envuelvo en una luz azul [...]' (Poniatowska 1991a, 50); and, interestingly enough, Poniatowska relates the color blue to Mexico: 'Tú me has olvidado allá en tu país siempre azul y yo me debato sola sin tener siquiera el consuelo de haber trazado en estos días, una línea que valga la pena' (Poniatowska 1991a, 26). So, aside from her references to the color blue and Angelina herself, Poniatowska frequently used the color in reference to Angelina's artwork as well.

In creating *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, Poniatowska has clearly taken the fragments of Angelina's letters found in Wolfe's chapter and has, as well as quoting them directly, expanded them into new, fictionalized letters. She also wove in other details about Diego's life in Paris from earlier chapters of Wolfe's book. One such quote that only lasted one line: 'I hold it against you, Diego, deeply, that you have refused to give me a child. That would be harder, but, my God, how much more sense my life would have' (Wolfe 1968, 127). Poniatowska has lifted this quote from Wolfe's chapter and has made it, along with the illness and death of her infant son, the major theme of one of the letters and a sub-theme of others. She did so through a series of invented reminiscences that filled the sections of the letters that are not direct quotes or historical data taken out

of Wolfe's biography. Nevertheless, the letters themselves appear to be the source she drew upon the most heavily.

As we can see, while part of the narrative was constructed using actual letters, some elements of the narration were purely Poniatowska's invention. It is difficult to know exactly which parts of each letter Elena Poniatowska formulated because she could have used other historical sources in order to construct her novella (which will be discussed in greater depth below). There is, nonetheless, one instance in which Poniatowska inserts her own contrived version of events that is especially noteworthy. It is the letter that refers to Angelina's falling in love with Diego. Poniatowska recreated Angelina as a woman who had fallen in love (at first sight) with Diego Rivera and who was afraid that he did not reciprocate those feelings:

Temblaba yo, Diego, no podía ni llevarme la taza a los labios, ¡cómo era posible que tú caminaras por la calle como el común de los mortales!, escogieras la acera de la derecha; ¡sólo un milagro te haría emerger de ese puñado de gente cabizbaja, oscura y sin cara, y venir hacia mí con el rostro levantado y tu sonrisa que me calienta con sólo pensar en ella! Te sentabas junto a mí como si nada, inconsciente ante mi expectativa dolorosa [...] Yo te escuchaba quemándome por dentro, las manos ardientes sobre mis muslos, no podía pasar saliva y sin embargo parecía tranquila [...] Yo estaba como drogada, ocupabas todos mis pensamientos, tenía un miedo espantoso de defraudarte. [...] y me sentía desgraciada por mi torpeza, mi nerviosidad, mis silencios, rehacía, Diego, un encuentro ideal para que

volvieras a tu trabajo con la certeza de que yo era digna de tu atención [...] y en la noche lloraba agotada sobre la almohada, me mordía las manos: ‘Mañana no acudirá a la cita, mañana seguro no vendrá. Qué interés puede tener en mí.’ (Poniatowska 1991a, 44-45)

In Poniatowska’s novella Angelina is presented as an individual who longs to be with Diego and is unsure of her ability to impress him. Diego, on the other hand, is seen as an Olympian figure whose continued interest in Angelina does not cease to surprise her. Wolfe’s publication offers no insight on this aspect of the couple’s relationship. The historical account, however, provided by Angelina herself is quite different from the evocation of those events in the narrative. She explained that, shortly after their meeting in Bruges, Belgium, Diego sent a declaration of his love to Angelina via a mutual friend, (he did not do so himself because he did not speak French), to which Angelina responded as follows: ‘Yo no tomé en serio esa declaración, pero desde ese momento Diego me solía acompañar cuando iba de compras [...] y hacía esfuerzos por hablarme en francés’ (Beloff 1986, 30). They kept in touch during the whole time they were in Bruges and traveled with a group of friends to London. There, Angelina clarified: ‘Diego se las arreglaba para ir solo conmigo, dejando a los demás compañeros en libertad de ir a donde quisieran, aunque a veces íbamos con ellos’ (Beloff 1986, 32). During their time together Angelina remembered that she was impressed by Diego’s intellect and enthusiasm, but she did not feel she was not in love with him:

Fue en aquellas visitas a los museos cuando pude apreciar su inteligencia, su entusiasmo y el profundo conocimiento que tenía de la pintura. [...]

Una noche María y Vladislava, curiosas de mis visitas a los museos a solas con Diego, me preguntaron si lo amaba o simplemente me divertía con aquel pobre muchacho enamorado de mí. Les respondí que no lo amaba, que me interesaba muchísimo ver las obras de arte con él, que lo encontraba muy inteligente y que después de todo, era libre y lo suficientemente grande para hacer lo que me pareciera. (Beloff 1986, 32)

One month passed by after the incident above and Diego, persistent in his efforts to win Angelina over, declared his love for Angelina once more:

[...] Diego en su mal francés, me hizo otra nueva declaración, esta vez directa. Le dije que comprendía muy bien lo que me quería decir, pero que yo no estaba en absoluto segura de mis sentimientos. Después [...] charlamos largamente sobre nuestras vidas. Le dije que reflexionaría sobre todo aquello. De vuelta a Brujas, me quedé poco tiempo, pues Diego me hacía una corte tan asidua, que yo me sentía muy presionada; así pues, decidí regresar a París para reflexionar en paz y dejé a mis compañeros en Brujas. Cuando Diego llegara a París, le diría que aceptaba que fuéramos novios y que creía poder amarlo. (Beloff 1986, 32-33)

So in comparing the historical account with Poniatowska's novella, it becomes clear that Poniatowska has embellished the facts. This is important to underline in case Poniatowska's novella is taken as a purely historical account of the two artists' relationship, because it is not. It could be considered an amalgam between the two genres because it effectively intertwines fact and fiction.

One of the main themes of Poniatowska's novella is the fact that Diego Rivera did not write to his ex-lover, Angelina. Each one of the letters in Poniatowska's novel refers to Angelina's desire to receive correspondence from Diego. Towards the end of the novel, she begins to insist more and more, even coming to the point of demanding a response from her ex-lover: 'Es inútil pedirte que me escribas, sin embargo deberías hacerlo. Sobre todo, contéstame esta carta que es la última con la que te importune, en la forma que creas conveniente pero *en toutes lettres*' (Poniatowska 1991a, 71).¹⁹ Nevertheless, in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, Diego was never shown as responding and Angelina gave up hope of receiving a written answer from him and resolved to continue her life alone in Paris. Wolfe, in his biography of Diego Rivera, has a different version. 'His only answer was, not a letter making everything clear, but a cable bidding her come to Mexico, yet sending no money for the fare' (Wolfe 1968, 127). Angelina Beloff also corroborated Wolfe's statement in her memoirs:

Me quedó también un resentimiento de que él no me escribió cuando se enamoró de Lupe Marín y después del último cable que me decía que me iba a mandar el dinero para que yo venga a México, ya no tuve más noticias de él y me mandó una señora mexicana poco conocida por mí

para anunciar que iba a casarse con Lupe y arreglar todos los asuntos.

(Beloff 1986, 91)

Contrary to the impression given in Poniatowska's novella, Diego did respond to Angelina. He did at one point have the intention of sending for Angelina and had sent her that message. Both Wolfe and Angelina Beloff agree on this point – though they disagree on whether or not Diego promised to send her money for the passage to Mexico.

The final passage in Poniatowska's story gives more insight as to why she might not have included the information Wolfe supplied about the cable in which Diego promised to send for Angelina. By way of an epilogue, Poniatowska ended her novella by describing Angelina and Diego's first encounter after many years of not seeing each other: '[Angelina] did not seek Diego out – she did not want to molest him. When they met at a symphony concert, Diego passed without even recognizing her!' (Wolfe 1968, 129). Poniatowska took advantage of Wolfe's heartbreaking ending in order to create for her readers a tragic ending to an already sad story. Throughout Poniatowska's novella, Diego's most notable characteristic is his absence. To include his cable in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* would be to allow the readers a ray of hope and let them think that perhaps Diego's intentions were honorable, thereby lessening the sense of loss and tragedy. Poniatowska's omission of the telegram is artistically effective in that it heightens the dramatical effects of the narrative; but it also serves to cast a negative shadow on Rivera's actions.

Another part of Poniatowska's novella that did not concur with Angelina's personal history was the account of her and Diego's encounter with Diego after many

years of separation. Poniatowska and Wolfe agree in their books that the encounter took place in the Mexican cultural center Bellas Artes, and that Diego passed Angelina by without even recognizing her. Angelina herself tells a completely different story, stressing that she did meet Diego on his return to Mexico City.

[Yo, Angelina] Pasaba algunos fines de semana en San Angel Inn, por la ‘invitación’ de Mme. Roue. Allá vi por primera vez a Diego después de once años de no vernos. Charlamos de política y de pintura. Yo nada más le dije que era un sinvergüenza y rehusé bajar para que él me presentará [sic] con un artista de cine y de su tercera mujer, Frida. Más tarde la he conocido. Detesto las exhibiciones. (Beloff 1986, 92)

In Wolfe’s biography of Diego Rivera, Angelina is said to have traveled to Mexico in 1935 (1968, 129); none the less, Angelina affirms in her memoirs to have arrived there in 1932 (1986, 80). It is possible that Wolfe’s recorded account did actually occur (Diego did pass by Angelina without even noticing her on that occasion in Bellas Artes in 1935), but the event he recorded must not have been the first time they met following her arrival in Mexico. Whereas the mistaken dates could simply be a confusion on the biographer’s part, the discrepancy was, nonetheless, carried over into Poniatowska’s novella just like the discrepancies regarding Angelina’s pet name.

At the same time though, not everything that is found in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* which is not in Wolfe’s biography can be taken as invention. There are details in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* that suggest that Elena Poniatowska used information in

her novella deriving from sources other than Wolfe's book or her imagination. One of these is the description of a project that Angelina and Diego worked on together in Barcelona for the Russian Zaire's consul (Poniatowska 1991, 27). This experience is not recorded in Wolfe's books. However, in *Memorias: Angelina Beloff* Angelina describes an experience almost identical to the one Poniatowska includes in her book:

[...] me dijo [el cónsul ruso] que en unos cuantos días tendría la pensión; mientras tanto me rogaba que le hiciera un trabajo. Se trataba de pintar sobre un óvalo de cobre un escudo de armas para el consulado. [...] Diego y yo pusimos manos a la obra. Diego pintó un encantador San Jorge con el dragón y yo me dediqué a hacer el águila y todo lo demás. El cónsul quedó encantado al ver el trabajo; me pagó cien pesetas y me ofreció que me quedara en Barcelona [...] (Beloff 1986, 46).

Obviously, since this account was published after the novella, Poniatowska could not have used Beloff's book as her source; but it does show that Poniatowska was using information from other historical sources in order to create *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*.

The aim of presenting these discrepancies between the historical accounts and the novel is not to try and convince the reader that nothing in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* has to do with a putative, original 'reality' (indeed, it is helpful to remember that much of the book was based on actual letters that Angelina wrote), but rather to help elucidate some of the historical leads in this work of fiction. Moreover, considering some

of the differences between the historical and the fictional texts can assist in providing the reader with some clues as to the author's intentions and limitations when she created her novella as well as the way in which she projected the subaltern. *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* is a narrative that introduces the reader to another type of subaltern: that of the immigrant and that of the bohemian who forms a part of society's margins. The protagonist is a woman whose marginalization derives partly from her choice of profession, but also in part from her status as an immigrant in a society which did not readily accept her.

Underlining the discrepancies detailed in this chapter is important because it reveals Poniatowska's personal agenda. The reader has seen that, when referring to the excerpts from Angelina's letters found in Wolfe's biography, Poniatowska faithfully recorded them. But at the same time, these elements play a minor role within the novel as a whole; the reality portrayed was manipulated according to her own desires and in the end she depicted what she wanted and how she desired to do so. This was especially evident in the case of her treatment of Diego Rivera. In *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, the subaltern Angelina Beloff's voice appeared through the almost direct quotation of her letters; but, as a novelist, Poniatowska used the historical context and figures to impart a personal message. In this case, Poniatowska's voice appears to overshadow Angelina's voice for two reasons: firstly because Angelina's voice (the actual quoted portions of the novella) is miniscule in relation to the section that Poniatowska creates, and secondly because the author admits to having used Angelina to say what she wanted to say: 'It was a very personal thing, very personal and impulsive. I think that I used Angelina Beloff to say many things I felt' (Poniatowska 1986, 28). So, in the end, it appears that in this

narrative the subaltern does not really speak for herself, but rather has her situation portrayed and her voice used to suit the purposes of the author in question.

Disability Studies and *Gaby Brimmer*

Though she is widely known for focusing on the marginal and the voiceless²⁰ in much of her writings, Poniatowska's work in this area has not always elicited the critical attention it deserves. The last section of this chapter will center on the manner in which *Gaby Brimmer* explores the world of the disabled.

In some ways, the following section of this chapter will help to demonstrate how Elena Poniatowska was ahead of her time with relation to Subaltern and Cultural Studies. In the 1970s, during the time in which contemporary literature in Mexico was experiencing the literary movement 'La Onda', Poniatowska came into contact with a young woman by the name of Gabriela Brimmer. Gaby, as she is presented to the reader, was born in the Mexican capital to Jewish immigrants and is severely disabled with cerebral palsy. After a series of interviews and correspondence between Brimmer and Poniatowska, they agreed to create a book, which Poniatowska describes as one that: 'quizás [...] les abra los ojos a los sanos sobre los miles de inválidos que hacemos a un lado porque creemos que no tienen conciencia' (Poniatowska 1979, 34). The 'testimonio' that they²¹ created would contribute to one of the basic tasks, described close to twenty years later, of the relatively new academic discipline of Disability Studies: 'to develop consciousness of disability issues [...] and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal' (Davis 1997, 26).

Poniatowska did create a new way of looking at the subaltern and the disabled. It has been stated that, traditionally: 'If disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented. It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities, although

minor characters, like Tiny Tim, can be deformed in ways that arouse pity. [...] On the other hand, as sufficient research has shown, more often than not villains tend to be physically abnormal: scarred, deformed, or mutilated' (Davis 1997, 21). Bearing this in mind, what follows will indicate how Elena Poniatowska subverted the previously stated literary tradition in several ways. When Poniatowska cast a severely disabled woman as the protagonist of *Gaby Brimmer*, she proceeded to exhibit a positive image of this character by demonstrating many of her achievements (such as her scholastic ones) along with the desires (like motherhood) with which much of her readership could identify. This narrative also exhibited what Gaby had in common with her contemporaries that made up the Mexican literary movement 'La Onda'. So, aside from displaying Poniatowska's subversion of previously established images of the disabled, this chapter argues that *Gaby Brimmer* can be viewed as a work that can be incorporated into the later stages of 'La Onda' literary movement in Mexico.

The text of *Gaby Brimmer* was created using three different voices, that of Sari – the mother; Florencia – Gaby's personal assistant; and Gaby herself. Gaby told her life story along with her opinions and advice to the readers, whilst Sari and Florencia counterbalanced the text with their opinions, their own version of Gaby's life, and also by demonstrating to the reader their role in Gaby's life as well.

Each one of these characters had a somewhat different perspective on their own and the protagonist's existence. Comparing their distinct outlooks can aid in generating a more global picture of the movements within the narrative. Gabriela was the most positive with respect to her life, and told the reader of her many achievements along with

her future plans. The other two women were much more hesitant, and even pessimistic, with regard to the future – especially Gaby's.

Despite her inability to sustain a conventional conversation by means of oral speech, Gaby Brimmer was able to communicate to the reader by writing her discourse with the aid of an electric typewriter or by spelling it out. This was possible because she would use her only normally functioning member, her left leg and foot - on a board that contained an alphabet. With this skill and the aid of Florencia she was able to study and graduate from primary, elementary, and secondary school, after which she began to study at La Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM).

Gaby's academic experience can, in some ways, be seen as representative of many of the other occurrences that can be found in this 'testimonio'. She decided she wanted to achieve something, set a goal and make a strong effort to accomplish what she desired. Gaby did as much as was possible on her own; but, due to the nature of her disability, almost always relied on her mother and Florencia for support as well.

Gabriela was not able to fulfill all of her goals. The protagonist suffered many setbacks: people who did not believe in her or who could not see beyond her physical limitations often hindered the protagonist's progress. Gaby's disabilities kept her from completing her University studies. None the less, in the end, she was able to achieve many of the goals she established. However, sometimes she had to do so using unconventional methods: i.e. though she was not able to complete her studies at the UNAM she continued her studies in an Open University independently. Often modification of an original goal was necessary in order to achieve a result similar to her original one.

Another example of this was her desire to be a mother and form a family. This was a point she spoke about several different times in this 'testimonio'. She shared with the reader feelings she had towards some friends of her age group that were of the opposite sex: 'Me he enamorado no una, sino muchas veces' (Poniatowska 1979, 167). Over the course of her story, she told the reader of several young men who were special in her life, some of whom she even contemplated as a future partner. However, the only way in which she was able to achieve her goal of being a mother was through adoption. The men she had hoped to depend on were not able to support her and so she had a family using an untraditional method.

The mixture of failure and success in this 'testimonio' is one of the ways in which Poniatowska created a text with its narrative more firmly grounded in reality, thus making it appear to be much closer to the actual world of the public. The lack of an idyllic portrayal of Gaby, the presentation of both the positive and the negative, the success and the failure, was one of the ways in which Poniatowska was able to succeed in underlining Gaby's human qualities. Though as a general trend the protagonist could be characterized as having a positive attitude, not everything she did or tried gave her the result she desired. The results were more varied. There are no easy *telenovela* (re)solutions in this narrative. Another tool that would help the readership to identify with Gaby are the different environments where the actions take place in this narrative. Even though Gaby had been to far away places such as San Francisco, Poniatowska chooses common places in Mexico, the home, school, the countryside for many, though not all, of the scenes in this book.

Gaby Brimmer demonstrated that, though her tools and resources were limited when compared to others, she was not simply an object that was moved around. This point is made clear when she refused to be put in a home for invalids and when she would not accept living with her family in the United States. Throughout *Gaby Brimmer* there is a positive tone, and a slow, gradual, progression towards accomplishment. However, the protagonist (along with Sari and Florencia) did share with the reader the many limitations she faced as well as the failures and frustrations she encountered in her life. Gaby was inclined to focus on what she could do notwithstanding her limitations. Her continued efforts to move forward despite adversity surely serve to inspire admiration from the reader whilst providing an inside view of a marginal world.

Whilst Elena Poniatowska was working with Gaby Brimmer in order to create this narrative, at approximately the same time she was also in contact with important members of 'La Onda' literary movement in Mexico, such as José Agustín²² and Parménides García Saldaña. Though it might not be obvious at first glance, there are definite connections between this popular literary movement and Poniatowska's unlikely protagonist. Given these connections, this chapter argues that *Gaby Brimmer* could be classified as belonging (at least partially) to 'La Onda' and can be seen as an example of one of the ways in which marginalization and subalternity were able to find a place in this literary movement.

Shortly after *Gaby Brimmer* came into print, Poniatowska published a critical article on the role of 'la Onda' in Mexican literature. In it, she traced the trajectory of some of the most outstanding members of 'La Onda', namely José Agustín and Parménides García. She also scrutinized the movement itself, its characteristics, and, the

changes it had experienced during its existence. The points she made in that essay will be used as a guideline and point of reference for the argument in the remainder of this chapter. In her article ‘La Literatura de La Onda’, Elena Poniatowska noted that it was difficult to identify precise characteristics relating to this movement: ‘Como generación tampoco se protegen ni se ayudan; no tienen siquiera un vehículo de expresión generacional porque ni siquiera comparten los mismos enfoques literarios [...]’ (Poniatowska 1986b, 202). Nonetheless, Poniatowska did affirm that: ‘Es sobre todo en la literatura de los más jóvenes donde se refleja la apertura del 68 hacia la creación de un nuevo espacio, libre, llano, en que las reglas del juego sean las del propio juego’ (Poniatowska 1986b, 205). Notwithstanding Rulfo’s characterization of their work as: ‘Literatura payasa’ (Poniatowska 1986b, 205), Poniatowska indicated that members of this group did follow specific norms: ‘El suyo es un experimento libre y nuevo dentro del quehacer literario. Tanto Parménides como José Agustín se pasan su temporada en el infierno, lo narran cercanamente [...]’ (Poniatowska 1986b, 205). In addition to this quality, Poniatowska emphasized that: ‘[...] más que ninguna otra generación, los de la Onda compartieron su vida – mal que bien – con el lumpen’ (Poniatowska, 1986b, 174).

In several different ways *Gaby Brimmer* is also a text that represents something new within Mexican literature. Though its central concern is reflected in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (1970) by the Chilean novelist José Donoso, which features a disabled protagonist, it is quite possible that this piece of testimonial literature is the only one of its kind in contemporary Mexican letters. (It should be noted as well that the role the disabled character and the narrative construction of both Donoso’s and Poniatowska’s works are quite different indeed. *Gaby Brimmer* presents the reader with a testimonial

view of the disabled whereas *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* does not.) During a time in which the urban poor, and indigenous populations of Latin America have received more attention than possibly ever before, it remains difficult to find literature on the physically disabled subaltern. One of the most innovative aspects of *Gaby Brimmer* is its joint authorship: Gaby Brimmer, with Poniatowska's assistance, was able to create a narrative in which she was able to speak about her life in a way which was not possible before. Publishing a book with this author meant at least two significant advantages for Gaby. Firstly, her story would be read by many of Poniatowska's readers and critics (as well as others) – thus possibly giving a wider readership than would be the case had she published it independently. Secondly, her text would remain in print longer and would appeal to a wider audience, being more accessible in book form than if would have been as a magazine article.

If Agustín and Parménides 'pasaron sus temporadas en el infierno' in order to qualify as members of 'La Onda' while they experimented with illegal drugs, and showed their solidarity with the urban poor, the protagonist of *Gaby Brimmer* was constantly linked to it. Whilst Agustín and Parménides could return to the bourgeois background of their parents (Agustín eventually did move into a upper-middle-class suburb outside Mexico City and Parménides died quite young of a drug overdose), Gaby's personal hell – constituted by her physical limitations - could never be cast aside or ignored. This inability to escape her tormentor became transparent in certain passages of her narrative. Though extremely positive in the face of her adverse circumstances, Gaby Brimmer was clear about the limitations her physical condition imposed on her: 'Se me olvida que legalmente no cuento y que en el banco aparezco siempre como incapacitada y aunque la

Jefa me dice que yo soy dueña de mugroso dinero, personalmente no puedo sacar ni un centavo. ¿Eso es ser dueño de algo? ¡Eso es pura madre!’ (Poniatowska 1979, 182). As this passage reveals, there were times when she rebelled against her disabilities too. Gaby spoke of the times she had loved, but deep down she knew that due to her physical limitations she would not be able to form a regular relationship with the men she loved. She shows the reader how, due to her and her carer’s physical limitations (ability to transport Gaby and her belongings) - as well as the student’s and teacher’s sense of apathy towards her - she is unable to continue studying in la UNAM. Unlike her contemporaries, Agustín and García Saldaña, Gaby Brimmer’s link to marginality is much more permanent and debilitating, but like them she too is able to narrate her ideas and feelings through her writing.

Like several members of ‘La Onda’, Brimmer is linked to the proletariat classes in Mexico. Though born to Austrian Jews who immigrated to Mexico and established successful businesses in the commercial sector, this handicapped woman is raised by and felt a strong bond to her carer who came from the popular levels of Mexican society. Gaby confirms: ‘Quizás la persona más importante en mi vida es Nana Florencia, la que lucha conmigo en todo y para todo, la que me acompaña a todos lados y a la que amo profundamente’ (Poniatowska 1979, 59). Since Florencia is the person who raises Gaby whilst her parents are working, in one way it could be said that she had two motherly influences: the one she received from her biological mother and the other she received from the woman who took care of her while her mother was otherwise engaged. One side of her upbringing is European and Jewish (though her parents were not strict observers of their religion), while the other is Mexican and popular.

Florencia's contact with Gaby Brimmer also allows her some physical contact with the proletarian world. This is possible because Gaby would accompany her nurse to the sector of the city where Florencia's working class relatives lived. Far from feeling estranged from this sector of society Gaby felt sufficiently comfortable in it to want to make it her home when her affluent family relations died: '[...] yo he encontrado una solución, vivir en San Agustín, una colonia proletaria en la que han construido una casa las hermanas de Nana. La gente sencilla siempre me ha aceptado mejor que la rica [...] En San Agustín me aceptan tal y cual como soy y ya' (Poniatowska 1979, 159). Perhaps this occurs because for some marginal sectors it is easier to accept other individuals who have also been victims of marginalization. Whatever the case may be, Gaby opts for this environment for herself and her adopted daughter in preference to the one to she is accustomed to in her own home: 'Me parece una atmósfera infinitamente más sana para mi Almita que aquello que puedo proporcionarle en la casa, en medio de tres mujeres más o menos felices, a pesar del relativo lujo. [...] A mí me gusta San Agustín, me siento bien allá [...]' (Poniatowska 1979, 194). Though during the course of *Gaby Brimmer* the protagonist never lived in that area on a long-term basis, she projected herself there in the future and she, like other 'Onda' writers, maintained strong feelings towards the subaltern.

As Poniatowska traces 'La Onda's' origins and movements, one of its characteristics she identifies is its genesis in the 'lumpen' of the United States. However, Poniatowska also clarifies that this literary trend sought to distance itself from such origins in order to create a national Mexican identity (Poniatowska 1986, 203). This same adherence to Mexico as Gaby's nation can be observed in this novel. One of the main

dilemmas represented throughout this testimonial work is whether or not Gaby would leave Mexico and live with her relatives in California. Gabriela Brimmer, like Parménides and Agustín, spends some time in the US, but in her case it is to visit family or to receive physical therapy. Gaby's relatives are the force that pressures her the most to move there, but Gaby's preference for Mexico remains firm:

¿Ir a San Francisco? [...] ¿Se habían puesto a pensar qué haría yo? [...] Les expliqué que viviría como parásito aguardando en casita el día en que alguno de los tres me sacara de paseo y me regresara después de algunas horas sintiéndose satisfecho de su acción caritativa. [...] ¿Habría maestros de redacción o algo por el estilo para que yo siguiera escribiendo? [...] He luchado demasiado en esta vida para acabar en un instituto norteamericano convertida en una ficha, un expediente. (Poniatowska 1979, 144)

Gaby's 'Mexicanization' does not originate so much from a desire to reject the United States, but rather to maintain the lifestyle she has fought to establish as a disabled individual. Her efforts appear to be about conserving some kind of personal lifestyle. As a subaltern in Mexico, much of her life story concerns her constant effort to incorporate herself into her country's system, an ongoing venture that yields positive and negative results. Though, like several of the writers of 'La Onda', Gaby's narrative has strong national tones, her desire for this focus appears to be related to her longing for personal integration within Mexican society and to her determination to remain creative despite her disability.

Poniatowska stated that one of the main catalysts that distanced 'La Onda' writers from the United States was the 1968 student movement in Mexico. *Gaby Brimmer* was also marked by this period. The protagonist affirmed: 'El 68 influyó mucho en mi carácter' (Poniatowska 1979, 124). While being treated for a minor injury in the Red Cross, Gaby met another youth, Luis del Toro, who introduced her to the student movement and helped her become involved in it. Like thousands of Mexican youth, Gaby went to protests, assemblies, marches, and participated in other political activities. Much of this influence is also evident in the references in the dialogues Gaby had with the reader. She names her electric typewriter 'Che', quotes Che Guevara, Mao, Marx, and other popular icons of the student movement in many of her conversations. There is much socialist rhetoric in her work.²³ When Luis del Toro was incarcerated in Lecumberri prison along with other young activists, Gaby visited him there on a regular basis. This experience, aside from its political repercussions on this character, also introduces her to new feelings of universal human significance a theme that places the wheelchair-confined protagonist on the same level with most of the world: love.

In *Gaby Brimmer*, love is a theme that both pulls the main character away from and pushes her towards the margins. This section shows that, like everyone else, Gaby is normal in that she is subject to those same emotions encountered by people who are not disabled. Experiencing those feelings, in one way, brings Gaby closer to the rest of the world – out of the margins. This connection is similar to one that Poniatowska made in the introduction of this book. She describes how, notwithstanding the physical difference between Gaby and other women, the protagonist would menstruate like other women. In this way they were the same. However, the possibility of using her feminine cycle in

order to conceive a child is where life becomes much more complicated for Gaby. To this extent, her disability separates her from other women. Her situation with respect to Luis del Toro is similar. She was capable of loving him, like most other woman would be; however, she also recognizes that her disability could have kept him from reciprocating her love in a way that she would have wanted: ‘Yo quise a Luis, pero si Dios me hizo así, tengo que vivir con eso y hacerme el bien a mí misma y a los que me rodean, aun fingiendo un chorro de veces y aunque me duela y tenga yo que reprimir ciertos impulsos vitales y naturales’ (Poniatowska 1979, 134). Gaby held back her desires and, upon his release from the prison, Luis married another woman.

Another aspect Poniatowska lists as a characteristic found in writers from ‘La Onda’ is the use of popular language in their literature: ‘todos de una manera u otra han tratado de rescatar un lenguaje coloquial popular [...]’ (Poniatowska 1986b, 175). *Gaby Brimmer* is no exception to this rule. It was quite common to encounter many colloquialisms employed by the Mexican youth at this time: *puto* [homosexual] (p. 160), *cámara* [hey] (p. 112), *la jefa* [mother] (p. 136), *¿qué onda?* [What’s up?] (pg. 112), *simón* [yes] (pg. 112) are just a few of the examples of the linguistic aspects of youth culture found in this book. Gaby’s voice is so different from that of her mother and her carer that often it would not have been necessary for Poniatowska to label each speaker. One of the elements that differentiates this text from that of Poniatowska’s other publications is the high content of colloquial youth language in this book when compared to others she has published, even including *La noche de Tlatelolco*. One of the possible reasons for this can be explained by the shared authorship of this book. In the other two narratives studied previously in this chapter, though Poniatowska incorporates many

different voices in this book, only her name is on the cover claiming sole authorship of the book (though she does recognize contributions when and where appropriate). Since *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* capture different time periods and characters, and because they are not testimonial texts forming a part of ‘La Onda’ movement, their style is relatively sophisticated in comparison with that of *Gaby Brimmer*.²⁴

In addition to helping to classify this ‘testimonio’ as a part of ‘La Onda’ movement, its lexis also helped to give more insight into the protagonist’s life as a young disabled woman. Gaby’s extensive use of colloquial language makes two important points. Firstly, that Gaby, even though she lived in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, did enter spaces where this youth language was spoken. It is important to remember that Nana, though from the popular sectors of Mexico, was not from the same generation as Gaby, and her mother, aside from being Austrian and speaking German, would not have used this language with Gabriela either. The second point to underline is that Gaby was able to understand and incorporate colloquial words and phrases into her speech. This demonstrates that, regardless of her disability which left her unable to speak verbally, she does understand, and is able to assimilate what is happening around her – whether it be youth slang, political rhetoric, or Che Guevara’s speeches - to the extent that she is able to show her comprehension of it in her written speech, thus demonstrating another aspect of Gaby’s intellectual normality when compared with her contemporaries.

The final characteristic from ‘La Onda’ that *Gaby Brimmer* contains actually serves to unite both the literary movement in question and Disability Studies. Towards the end of her essay on these particular writers Poniatowska points to the following

quality: ‘Antes [de ‘La Onda’], ciertos temas se trataban con pinzas, o simplemente se silenciaban’ (Poniatowska 1986b, 207). If ‘La Onda’ writers broke much ground in the way they introduced taboo subjects in the Mexican literary canon, then *Gaby Brimmer* is no exception. As mentioned earlier, this ‘testimonio’, made by Poniatowska and Brimmer, is most likely one of the first (if not the first) to portray a disabled Mexican protagonist in contemporary Mexican letters. Moreover, these two authors, anticipated by several years, one of the main tenets of Disability Studies by developing consciousness of disability issues and instituting: ‘alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal’ (Davis 1997, 26). Poniatowska and Brimmer’s text introduced in the Mexican literary world an innovative literary document that, while following trends common to its generation, served several other purposes as well.

I now return to one of the central questions of this thesis: does the subaltern speak? It would be difficult to say that *Gaby Brimmer* allows the subaltern to speak in a technical, Spivakian sense. There would be questions of authorship and editing to consider. For example: Who asked the questions in the interviews? Who edited the manuscript? What parts of Gaby’s testimony were included? Why? Who decided on the final version? Poniatowska? Gaby Brimmer? Both? The copy editor? All three? Why? Nonetheless, this book does have important differences with regards to the subaltern speech that make it different from the others analyzed thus far in this chapter. *Gaby Brimmer* includes Gaby’s name on the cover. This demonstrates a partially-shared authorship with Poniatowska – a unique element not found in the other two narratives considered in this chapter. There are definite divisions of voices in this text. Unlike *Hasta no verte Jesus mío*, which appears to be a pure monologue with no specific divisions

aside from the chapters, or *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, which was created as a set of unanswered letters, *Gaby Brimmer* does contain specific divisions. Elena Poniatowska clearly marks her voice in her introductory chapter. Then, each one of the three women who make up the rest of the text, Florencia, Sari, and Gaby, each have their speech visibly divided into sections throughout the body of the ‘testimonio’. This makes it even easier than in other publications of Poniatowska to perceive the different voices that appear at different moments. It would appear that the subaltern, while not receiving a perfect representation, is portrayed in a more nuanced way in this text than in other novels.

By way of a conclusion, one of the questions that exists with relation to subaltern studies in a literary context is whether or not novels that deal with the subaltern subject can, or do, reveal information that helps to understand the subaltern and the life he or she leads. As evidenced by the analysis in this chapter Elena Poniatowska **does** invent and fictionalize when creating her novels. This is not surprising since these books are ‘testimonios’ and narratives rather than scientific ‘objective’ studies. What is more, as observed especially in the case of *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, we noted the presence of a personal agenda in Elena Poniatowska’s writings that deliberately caused her to alter events, thereby deviating from an historical version of reality. Moreover, we also observed that she felt inspired to write on this subject in order secretly to cathect personal feelings she was experiencing at that time in her life. However, the section of this chapter on *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* showed that a novel that deals with a subaltern subject often reveals information that can bring the reader closer to an understanding of the subaltern’s way of life. That is because at least a portion of these novels are based on

the concrete life experiences of an individual when Elena Poniatowska investigated and with whom she came into close contact. The final text studied in this chapter, *Gaby Brimmer*, is by far the most unique of the three narratives. Whilst, as affirmed earlier, it would be difficult to confirm that the subaltern speaks in *Gaby Brimmer* in a technical Spivakian form, this work has the clearest divisions with respect to the ‘marking’ of voice and authorship of the three novels studied. Furthermore, this text, having a co-author who is a subaltern, promises to bring the reader closer to the subaltern than the other two narratives do. It would appear that Poniatowska has been redoubling her efforts to ground her testimonial texts in concrete and verifiable social contexts. The author incorporates that reality in order to create a literary work, which, though fictional in some respects, to some degree, allows the subaltern to speak.

¹ For examples of this type of study, see the following works: Hancock (1983, 342-58) presents Jesusa as a woman who defies traditional stereotypes. Davis (1986, 224-41) compares the two novels and finds parallels between the two main characters’ lives. López (1991, 3-8) reviews the already popular view that Jesusa Palancares is an atypical Mexican woman. Kuhnheim (1994, 469-78) argues that the character Tina Modotti offers the reader a distinct view of Mexico that repairs the division between the alternate views of History. Williams (1994, 215-24) uses a psychoanalytical approach and argues that Jesusa manipulates the whole text. Shaw (1995, 111-22) focuses on classifying the women in this book and their relationships with other men. Sommer (1995, 913-40) reviews the creation of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and compares and contrasts Jesusa Palancares with Rigoberta Menchú, concluding that Jesusa does not hide as much of her story as Rigoberta. Shaw (1996, 191-204) uses psychology to consider the different ways Jesusa’s personality is constructed. Adriazola-Rodríguez (1997, 33-38) published an article describing Poniatowska’s portrayal of Quiela as a didactic lesson to women with talent. Dobrian (1997, 33-44) considers the image of Angelina Beloff as reflected in Poniatowska’s novella along with Frida Kahlo’s image as portrayed in her own art work. Ekland (1997, 73-82) discusses the main character’s image in terms of how she sees herself in the first 150 pages of the novel in question. Vaughn (1997, 40-55) studies the projection of the female characters in this novel.

² For examples of this type of study, consult the following works: Gale-Chevigny (1985, 49-62) underlines the fact that Poniatowska’s privileged status in Mexican society allows her to speak for the voiceless. Kerr (1991, 370-91) tries to decide if Poniatowska or Jesusa is the author of this novel. Vilches Norat (1994, 283-90) believes that by including marginal classes in her literature, Elena Poniatowska gives the reader a view of ‘todo México’. López (1998, 21-37) considers the ways in which Poniatowska controls the character of Jesusa. Gardner (2003c, 63-78) focuses on the projection of Jesusa Palancares within the framework of subaltern studies.

³ For some critical studies in this area, see the following examples: Foster (1984, 40-51) argues that *La noche de Tlatelolco* is a testimonial novel. Cela (1991, 149-56) asks whose voice prevails in the novel, Poniatowska’s or Jesusa’s? Jörgenson (1991, 80-90) demonstrates how Elena Poniatowska manipulated the voices found in *La noche de Tlatelolco* through her role as chief editor. Jörgenson (1997, 57-72) reviews *Tinísima* and discusses the processes and sources involved in its creation.

⁴ Two recent articles which were inaccessible at the time this thesis was written are 'El silencio como tema en la literatura de exilio en *La nave de los locos* y *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*' (Rodríguez 2000, 294-305) and 'Una historia que nunca será la suya: Feminismo, poscolonialismo y subalternidad en la literatura femenina mexicana' (Linhard 2002, 135-56).

⁵ Pozas mentions one of the atypical qualities of Juan's life in a footnote. 'Por regla general, los niños son bien tratados en Chamula; tienen libertad y casi nunca se les golpea. Se tienen con ellos muchas consideraciones, y una paciencia ilimitada para enseñarlos. El caso de Juan Pérez Jolote parece ser una excepción, porque tampoco es frecuente que los niños huyan de su casa' (Pozas 1968, 113).

⁶ Aside from her tutelage under Oscar Lewis, Poniatowska studied in a private British-run academy named the Windsor School in Mexico City upon her arrival in Mexico (Jørgensen 1994, xii).

⁷ For a more complete definition and discussion of the culture of poverty see Oscar Lewis' book *La vida*.

⁸ Jesusa's only significant adopted son, Perico, —he stands out because he was with Jesusa the longest — returned to the protagonist much later in his life after he had previously rejected her during his youth. Perico did appear in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, but the reader only receives Jesusa's account of this part of her life.

⁹ Though she later did this in an article in *Vuelta* (vol. 24, 1978) and an even fuller account in *Luz, Luna, la Lunitas* was published after the death of the informant, Josefina Bórquez.

¹⁰ This article is a recompilation of two illuminating articles written by Poniatowska (one in 1978 the other in 1987) on Jesusa Palancares and *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*.

¹¹ It is possible that Poniatowska did not mention the location for fear of identifying the informant and compromising her ability to remain anonymous.

¹² 'Eliminé cuanta sesión espiritual pude' (Poniatowska 1978, 12).

¹³ '[...] ni mi vida actual ni la pasada tienen que ver con la de Jesusa. Seguí siendo ante todo, una mujer frente a una máquina de escribir' (Poniatowska 1994, 51).

¹⁴ Perhaps that is one of the reasons why Elena Poniatowska eliminated her own presence from the novel itself, because she really did not have anything to do with Bórquez's reality apart from the fact that she used some of its elements in order to create the fictional character, Jesusa.

¹⁵ For the purposes of this study, *telenovla* refers to the Latin American 'soap operas' which now play an important role in popular culture in Latin America: some classic examples are *A escrava Isaura* (Brazil), *Simplemente María* (Peru), and *María del Barrio* (Mexico). These are quite often short melodramas (lasting approximately three to six months) whose characters are extreme archetypes, saints/devils, virgins/whores, and so forth.

¹⁶ In her memoirs, Angelina describes the definitive moment of her separation from Diego Rivera in the following way: 'Me quedó también un resentimiento de que él no me escribió cuando se enamoró de Lupe Marín y después del último cable que me decía que me iba a mandar el dinero para que yo venga a México, ya no tuve más noticias de él y me mandó una señora mexicana poco conocida por mí para anunciar que iba a casarse con Lupe y arreglar todos los asuntos. Él sabía que yo nunca le pondría ningún obstáculo y era injusto que hizo saber sus intenciones por una persona ajena para recibir este golpe y no llorar delante de ella' (Beloff 1986, 91). [It should be mentioned that, in addition to the above, this quote was partially included on page 121.]

¹⁷ It was originally published as a short story in the literary magazine *Vuelta* (1978, vol. 2).

¹⁸ Betram Wolfe writes about the condition of Angelina's letters: 'In Diego's files I found letters from her, without date or definable order [...]' (Wolfe 1968, 123).

¹⁹ Note that this is almost an exact quote lifted out of Wolfe's book: 'It is useless to tell you to write to me, but you ought to do it just the same. Above all, you must answer this letter, and answer in whatever way you will, but *en toutes lettres*' (Wolfe 1968, 127).

²⁰ On more than one occasion Elena Poniatowska herself has refuted the idea that there are people who are voiceless: 'No es verdad que haya gente sin voz. La literatura testimonial proviene de las voces de los perdedores, de los campesinos, de la gente que no está en una torre de marfil' (Mora 2001). None the less, she claims that her writing does help marginal voices to be heard by others: '[A Elena Poniatowska] No le gusta que la califiquen como la escritora que ha puesto voz a los que carecen de ella. "Ése es un cliché que no responde a la realidad. Todos tienen voz, aunque sea desgarradora. Lo único que he hecho es poner un cauce para que se oiga a los más desfavorecidos"' (Castilla 2001).

²¹ Both Gaby Brimmer and Elena Poniatowska sign as authors of the present work.

²² Elena Poniatowska worked with Jose Agustín in the late seventies in the literary workshop, 'El grupo', discussed in chapter two.

²³ It should be noted that much of what Poniatowska was writing at this time showed a strong interest in the Mexican student movement and much of the political reference that accompanied it. Two good examples of this are her works, *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971), and *Fuerte es el silencio* (1991b).

²⁴ Poniatowska clarified that in her first version of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* Jesusa Palancares did not use vulgar language, though she later modified this so that Jesusa would appear more like the real life person Josefina Bórquez (Poniatowska 1978, 9).

Chapter Four: Silvia Molina

Silvia Molina was born in Mexico City in 1946 where her mother, a young widow, raised her and her three brothers. Molina's father, an important figure in the state of Campeche, died when Molina was only two years old. She was brought up in the Mexican capital and attended a private Liceo Francés for her early formal education. Her knowledge of France and Europe developed even further when, in 1960, she went to live with an aunt in Paris at the age of fourteen (Blanco 2001, 476). Upon her return, Molina completed her secondary studies and went on to obtain a degree in Anthropology at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Then in 1968 she returned to Europe. On this occasion she went to London to improve her English. When she returned to her home country, Molina became a Language teacher at Lancer de México in the Mexican Capital teaching French to the nationals and Spanish to the foreigners. In the 1970s Molina took an interest in literature, particularly in the work of the young author José Agustín. It was during her efforts to search out José Agustín that she encountered Elena Poniatowska's writers' workshop and participated in it.¹ This experience proved to be of great importance to her literary career since it was through this workshop that she was able to meet not only Elena Poniatowska but also Hugo Hiriart, both of whom, according to Molina, inspired her to become an author (Blanco 2001, 478).² Molina's first published novel, *La mañana debe seguir gris* (1977), was a product of her time spent in 'El grupo'. Since then, Silvia Molina has continued creating more novels along with short stories, children's stories and, in addition, she has directed literary workshops herself. Amongst her students are some of the prominent members of the 'generación del crack' who

include the contemporary Mexican authors, Jorge Volpi and Ignacio Padilla. Moreover, Silvia Molina and her writing have afforded her teaching opportunities in universities in Mexico and in the United States as well as her current appointment as cultural attaché for the Mexican Embassy in Brussels, which she has held since 2001. At present, Molina has seven novels to her credit: *La mañana debe seguir gris* (1977), *Ascención Tun* (1981), *Leyendo en la tortuga* (1981), *La familia que vino del norte* (1987), *Imagen de Héctor* (1990), *El amor que me juraste* (1999), and *La muchacha de azul* (2001). She has also written two collections of short stories, *Dicen que me case yo* (1987) and *Un hombre cerca* (1992), and the play *Circuito Cerrado* (1995). Silvia Molina has been the recipient of several awards for her works. In 1977, like her mentor and teacher Elena Poniatowska, she was awarded the *Premio Xavier Villarrutia* for her novel, *La mañana debe seguir gris*. Two years later, Molina was also the beneficiary of a scholarship from *El Centro Mexicano de Escritores*, covering the period of 1979-1980. It was during that time that she wrote her second novel *Asención Tun*. It is worth noting that this novel was acclaimed as the first *indigenista* novel published in Mexico for twenty years (Teichmann 1990, 122). More recently Molina has won the Premio Nacional de Literatura Infantil Juan de la Cabada (1992) for her children's books some of which include *Mi familia y la Bella Durmiente cien años después* (1993) and *El misterioso caso de la perra extraviada* (1996).

However, despite being recognized by the award of these prizes and the scholarship from *El Centro Mexicano de Escritores* (1979-1980), Silvia Molina has received relatively little attention from critics. What has been written on her tends to adopt an historical approach – several studies, indeed, see Molina's fiction as an attempt

to re-write history.³ Others focus on character analysis (more often than not, concentrating on the female protagonists) in the study of Molina's novels.⁴ Aside from these two overarching tendencies, additional articles have addressed issues such as the argument for including her in the contemporary Mexican literary canon, comparisons between Molina's novels and those of other important female Mexican authors, and even the treatment of the subject of incest in her drama *Circuito Cerrado*.⁵ Interestingly enough, although the majority of the critical articles published on Molina in refereed journals focus on *Ascensión Tun* - the novel most centrally preoccupied with subaltern characters – no one to date has considered this specific narrative in the context of subaltern theory.⁶

This chapter will focus on two of Silvia Molina's novels, *El amor que me juraste* and *Ascensión Tun* and one of her short stories 'Mentira Piadosa'. One of the main reasons for this, as will be further clarified later in this chapter, is that these three narratives deal closely with subaltern themes and characters. I will analyze the representation of the subaltern subject in these works and ask the critical question of whether or not these particular characters in each narrative speak/have a voice. In order to do so, it will be necessary to present case studies of each individual fiction in the context of subaltern theory.

Of particular relevance is the theory of the hybrid and hybridity⁷ as presented by Néstor García Canclini in his study *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (1995). In his work, Canclini argues that in defining modern Latin America: 'The pluralist perspective, which accepts fragmentation and multiple combinations among tradition, modernity, and postmodernity, is indispensable for considering the Latin

American conjuncture at the end of the century' (Canclini 1995, 264). This cultural theorist has described present day Hispanic-American society in the following terms: 'The hybrid sociability that contemporary cities induce leads us to participate intermittently in groups that are cultured and popular, traditional and modern' (Canclini 1995, 266). While Canclini does see Latin American society overall in terms of hybridization, he also recognizes that there are groups who seem to be almost 'outside' the process: 'There are those who continue to affirm their territorial identity, from indigenous peoples to ecologists. There are élite and popular sectors that reestablish the specificity of their patrimonies or search for new signs in order to differentiate themselves from others' (Canclini 1995, 266). In short, in his study *Hybrid Cultures* Canclini promotes the notion that modern-day Latin American culture and society in general is made up of hybrid combinations of past and present, tradition and modernity, but at the same time he recognizes that there are other groups that separate themselves from the mainstream, rejecting hybridism and searching for new signs (and patterns) that mark them as different from the general population. It is this class of élite subjects that is present in both texts considered in this chapter.

As we shall see, the élite characters in Molina's fiction suffer from what might be called 'subaltern blindness'. These people, forming an important part of Mexico's élite, are Manichaeian in their outlook: 'modern = cultured = hegemonic' (Canclini 1995, 145). These characters do not appear to understand the subaltern, nor is that their desire. Analysis of the narratives in question will allow the reader to observe this subaltern blindness which demonstrates that the bourgeoisie are apparently incapable or unwilling

to assimilate or comprehend this part of Mexico's populace. These characters want to affirm their territorial identity within the upper échelons of Mexican society.

One of the other important considerations that will also be explored in the present analysis originates in a statement made by Molina with regard to the ability of the bourgeoisie to represent the marginal with a high level of fidelity. Molina's postulate was presented during a private interview between Silvia Molina and Nathaniel Gardner:

N.G.: Hay algunos críticos, como por ejemplo 'Gayatri Spivak', que dice que el escritor o la escritora no puede representar a una persona que no sea de su propia clase, no puede, y si trata de hacerlo, lo que sale es la voz del escritor o la escritora. Que no puede ser una voz auténtica de ese tipo de persona, sobre todo cuando se trata de los seres marginados, subalternos. ¿Qué opina de eso? ¿Tiene razón o no..?

S.M.: Yo creo que en parte sí tiene razón fíjate, yo hace muchos años hice una selección de unos cuentos míos para reeditarlos. Yo tenía varios cuentos publicados por aquí y por allá y había publicado unos libros de cuentos que se llama *Libros España* en una edición que hizo la UNAM, de la Universidad Metropolitana, y me pidieron un libro de cuentos.

Entonces, hice una selección y entonces, una amiga escritora me dijo qué cuentos había dejado yo afuera y yo le dije: 'Mira dejé afuera tal y tal cuento. -Mira, de momento no me acuerdo. - Y me dijo: 'Claro verdad.

Porque es de alguien muy burgués ¿verdad?' Como si fuera una crítica mala, digamos ¿no? Porque provenía de la burguesía. Y yo me acuerdo

que yo le contesté: ‘Es que yo provengo de allí.’ Yo no podría escribir como alguien del campo porque no es mi cultura. Ni ha sido mi preocupación. Sí creo que lo logras hacer cuando te pones la meta de entrar en esa cultura y de hablar como el personaje pero yo creo que te sale de una manera más natural cuando proviene de lo que conoces. De lo que has experimentado de dónde viene tu experiencia vital ¿no?

N.G.: Entonces ¿Ud. tendría que conocer al sujeto antes de poder hablar de él.

S.M.: Sí, definitivamente, sí necesitas como tú dices, ‘ponerte en sus zapatos’. Si vas a escribir por ejemplo de alguien del campo lo menos que puedes hacer es ir a vivir la experiencia del campo. Necesitas un poco meterte un poco en los pantalones del personaje, y cuando es de un medio que no conoces. Tienes que meterte en ese medio, y experimentar cosas. No puedes hablar de lo que no tienes experiencia. No es algo que pueda salir de una manera natural, ni verosímil ¿no? (ISM)

This exchange clarifies several points. Silvia Molina does identify herself with the Mexican bourgeoisie and feels that it is more natural for her to write from that point of reference when constructing a narrative. However, Molina also states that she believes that if she makes the effort to do so, it is possible for her to write about the subaltern sectors of society (if she does the proper groundwork beforehand). In the quotation above she describes writing about the subaltern as a task that is conceivable after adequate study and experimentation. While it holds true that the majority of Molina’s writings do express

a bourgeois ideology and appear to have a central focus on this class, at first glance, the three narratives analyzed in this chapter seem to deviate from Molina's established pattern. They have protagonists who are from the marginal classes of Mexican society and project themselves as works that are concerned with addressing topics that relate to subaltern studies. This study investigates the extent to which these three narratives concerning the subaltern project a bourgeois ideology and the extent to which they have been able to express ideological constructs that could be viewed as originating from the margins of society.

The question as to whether or not the subaltern speaks will be addressed in our discussion of *Ascensión Tun*. A detailed character analysis will create a means of comparison that will help the reader to see even more clearly the differences between the portrayal of the subaltern and the hegemonic discourse in this narrative in addition to proposing possible cause variables. Other aspects to be highlighted in this section of the chapter will be the roles of the institution and of the oral tradition along with their importance in the creation of this novel.

This section begins with an analysis of 'Mentira piadosa', which, as we shall see, can be viewed as a tool for critiquing the other two works in question.

'Mentira piadosa'

'Mentira piadosa', which appeared between the publication of *Ascensión Tun* and *El amor que me juraste*, forms part of a collection of short stories included in the anthology *Un hombre cerca* (1992). Of these seven brief narratives, this is the only one that deals specifically with the subaltern. The protagonist Carmela, a bourgeois woman in her mid-forties who lives and works in the Mexican capital, narrates 'Mentira piadosa'.

An unexpected reencounter with Eugenia, one of her old classmates, approximately thirty years later causes Carmela to reflect on the past. The story is built around a series of flashbacks which allow her to reevaluate the time she spent with Eugenia at *El Instituto Cambridge*. Though in the beginning Carmela feels uncomfortable about Eugenia's reappearance, she decides to reestablish contact with her in an attempt to comprehend some past events and to close an emotional wound. In the end, Carmela's final reflections make it uncertain whether this objective is achieved.

Though each of Molina's narratives is unique, this particular short story offers the most interesting test case of the projection of the subaltern in her work, as we shall see.

The Narrator

Those of Molina's narrators who endeavor to understand the subaltern are normally non-subaltern, female, and come from the upper-échelons of Mexican society. In 'Mentira piadosa', the narrator is Carmela who lives in the bourgeois suburb San Miguel Chapultepec, in the Mexican capital.⁸ Carmela's husband is an administrator, her daughter studies in the United States, and her son works in Quintana Roo. The protagonist herself works for the Banamex's Cultural Foundation (Banamex being one of the most important banks in Mexico) where she meets and works with different artists. The element, however, which underlines her elite social background, is the school she attends, El Instituto Cambridge, an exclusive all girls' school: 'El Instituto Cambridge, con ese nombre tan pretencioso, no tenía más de noventa estudiantes y era una escuela para mujeres, laica y bilingüe [...] Los grupos eran tan pequeños que a veces juntaban cursos en un salón y las clases llegaban a ser casi individuales' (Molina 1993, 70). Aside from the school's name, which evokes the United Kingdom's top university, the only other physical description the reader receives with regard to this institution is of its front

gates. Made out of light blue metal peacocks, the entryway into this school gives the impression that only the élite can enter. The ‘pavorreal’ (Molina 1993, 71) alludes to royalty and, thus, exclusivity.

As often occurs in Silvia Molina’s fiction, ‘Mentira piadosa’ focuses on the relationship between a middle-class protagonist and a subaltern character who intrigues her. Carmela’s curiosity, for example, is aroused when she comes into contact with Eugenia. Referring to her attendance at such a school Carmela comments: ‘Viéndola, era inevitable pensar en un misterio. ¿Qué hacía allí?’ (Molina 1993, 68). In this particular instance, Eugenia is marginalized because she is physically different:

Daba la impresión de una veinteañera disfrazada de colegiala porque el pecho frondoso y las curvas del trasero se le marcaban, por la tela del uniforme, de una manera llamativa, vulgar. [...] Había una expectativa en el grupo con una muchacha como ella. Por lo general, las nuevas eran tímidas y llegaban sin hacerse notar. Su presencia, allí, de pronto, además de extraña, era una declaración de guerra [...]. (Molina 1993, 68)

Differences that in other contexts could be considered positive (possessing an attractive body and an outgoing personality) are described in negative terms because they are not considered socially appropriate by Eugenia’s classmates. They are even described as vulgar by the narrator. This specific text offers a clear and intriguing example that subalternizing factors can be, to a certain extent, quite relative as they adapt to hegemonic needs and standards. However, notwithstanding the divisions between Eugenia and her

classmates, the narrator becomes interested in this isolated individual, when she catches a glimpse of a bruise on her leg: 'Me fui pensando qué podía haber hecho Eugenia para recibir ese trato y no le conté a nadie' (Molina 1993, 73). Carmela's desire to unravel this marginalized character's secrets, however, is, as we shall see, more a self-serving journey into the unknown than an attempt to manifest her solidarity with the subaltern. When, for example, Carmela is interested in helping Eugenia we note she only treats physical symptoms (the bruise). She does not seem to concern herself with treating the greater problem (the fact that a family member beats her). Carmela, the bourgeois character seems content to keep Eugenia's secrets to herself instead of revealing them to someone who could assist this victim in receiving proper aid.

One of the characteristics of the narrator at this particular juncture of Molina's fiction is her status as a detective-like figure: 'Seguía curiosa y, sobre todo, quería reclamarle que me hubiera usado de esa manera. Deseaba saber la verdad, me sentía con derecho a ella' (Molina 1993, 74). In this example, we see the narrator's belief that it is her right to know the subaltern and, in particular, her inner life. Her privileged position in society gives her the right – it seems -- to access this information. However, Carmela – and in this she is typical of Molina's narrators – does not like what she finds. At the end of 'Mentira piadosa' Carmela, having discarded several revelations about Eugenia's life, still appears to have more questions than answers: 'Pensaba en lo que me había relatado y callé otra vez. Sabía que saliendo de allí sus palabras y su imagen iban a acompañarme durante algún tiempo. Eso sucedió hace dos años. Y todavía nos veo como si fuera en este momento, sentadas en aquella mesa de La Pérgola' (Molina 1992, 82). Even two years after Eugenia's final revelations to Carmela, she seems to be haunted by the images

created by her friend's confession. Thus, though this narrator does find (at least in part) what she wanted, it does not appear to have left her with the sense of satisfaction she originally hoped for.

The Subaltern

Though all of Molina's subaltern characters are different, they do share a few common elements. One of them is their difference from the norm. In Eugenia's case it is manifested via her personality and her body, as well as, to a lesser degree, the lower income that separates her from the other classmates, though this element does change as she grows older. Another factor that often characterizes Molina's subaltern is that they possess some attributes that are particularly interesting to the narrator as already noted, 'Mentira piadosa' epitomizes this trend. Not all subalterns, though, are considered attractive enough to get her attention, and many are either ignored or go unnoticed. One episode that underscores this particular point in 'Mentira piadosa' is Carmela's avoidance of disabled people. Although she could reach El Instituto Cambridge by simply walking in a straight line from the street where she lives, she regularly goes well out of her way to avoid walking in front of an institution for the mentally handicapped: '[...] porque me deprimía verlos babear a través del enrejado, caminando con torpeza y mirándome con ojos de expresión indefinible: me parecía clara y confusa, inocente y maliciosa al mismo tiempo' (Molina 1992, 71). Aside from their unpleasant physical appearance, Carmela is bothered by the notion of social justice: 'Cuando se me hacía tarde y me veía obligada a pasar por allí, desviaba la vista para no llegar a clases incómoda, preguntándome por qué la naturaleza era injusta y le había negado a esos niños la oportunidad de vivir como yo tenía' (Molina 1993, 71). Given her social class it is not surprising that this character feels uncomfortable when confronted by mentally and physically handicapped children.

In effect, these particular isolating factors are possibly the only ones that could easily touch her life because they do not discriminate with regard to sex, age, or class. None the less, it is worth noting that, while her apparently earnest questions with regard to these children's disabilities do imply that she wishes their lives could be better, they are also self-serving in the sense that she holds herself up as the standard of excellence. Clearly, though, the most important point to make is that it is the non-subaltern narrator who chooses the subaltern objects on whom her gaze will focus. Only those subalterns whom the non-subaltern narrator finds worthy of attention are developed further in the narrative. The others are consigned to the dustbin of history.

Despite their social inferiority, Molina's subaltern protagonists possess agency. This agency is manifested on several occasions. Eugenia demonstrates this quality when she is rebellious in class: she wears cosmetic products although it is prohibited and answers the teacher's questions with comical sarcasm and irony. Though Carmela has decided to befriend her, Eugenia repeatedly rebuffs her. Carmela finds out Eugenia has been hit with a belt, but her sympathy is rejected by Eugenia: 'Cuando me acerqué [Eugenia] fue agresiva: -Lárgate de aquí' (Molina 1993, 73). In this case Eugenia uses Carmela's interest in her in order to get her own way. This is something the adult Carmela recognizes later on: 'No te he perdonado, Eugenia. Abusaste de mi amistad y de mi ignorancia. -Tienes razón, Carmela -me dijo' (Molina 1993, 73). The most obvious way in which Eugenia takes advantage of this friendship is when she lies to Carmela, telling her she needs her to accompany her to the dentist. Reluctantly, after some convincing by her friend and after lying to her parents about her plans location for that afternoon, Carmela agrees to go along. Eugenia takes her to a regular home in 'la Zona

Rosa' suburb. Eugenia goes upstairs with 'the doctor' and though Carmela feels suspicious, it is not until several hours later that she discovers that she has accompanied her friend to a clandestine abortion clinic; Eugenia had terminated a pregnancy. Feeling outraged at having let herself be an accomplice to this act, Carmela promptly abandons Eugenia, though this experience would leave her feeling guilty for some time afterwards. Many years later, when the two women reunite, Eugenia explains how she had tricked Carmela for her own benefit: 'La condición era que llegara acompañada. Dije que eras mi hermana. Después de todo, nos parecíamos: una mentira piadosa' (Molina 1993, 83). Eugenia is – as we can see -- not a subaltern character who is completely at the mercy of the hegemonic narrator. The subaltern character often refuses to conform to the narrator's desires in Molina's fiction.

Notwithstanding the narrator's desire to know the subaltern's inner self, the internal aspects of the subaltern character remain mostly hidden to the narrator and, indeed, to the reader. The marginalized character is seen from an external point of view only. For example, the reader is able to 'overhear' Carmela's thoughts; in contrast, the inner thoughts of Eugenia's character are hidden from the reader who is only able to perceive what she does and says. The only intimate contact the reader has with this person is from what she says in her conversations with Carmela. This gives the impression that the subaltern is never fully knowable. When compared to the non-subaltern's more rounded character the marginalized personage seems to be characterized by gaps. The question inevitably emerges as to whether these voids are there to demonstrate the fissures between the hegemonic and subaltern worlds. In Molina's work

as we shall see, these cracks appear to point to the bourgeoisie's inability to delve into the subaltern mind which remains in Spivak's sense of the term, never fully 'recoverable'.

Isolation is another characteristic of Molina's subaltern characters. While her fiction recognizes the existence of subaltern communities within Mexican society, as represented by the institution for the mentally handicapped in 'Mentira piadosa', the subaltern protagonists Molina has chosen (in this specific case Eugenia) are often quite oblivious to social deprivation. Loneliness is definitely a characteristic Eugenia possesses. When she arrives at her new classroom on her first day at school she walks to the back of the classroom and sits at an isolated desk. Before her friendship with Carmela blossoms, she is described as sitting under a peach tree, reading. The other students seem to have forgotten about her. None the less, the most poignant image of her isolation is offered by the adult Eugenia:

La gente habla de felicidad, pero la verdadera felicidad es cuando ya no te importa si te mueres, cuando ya no te importa nada. Llegas a eso después de un tiempo, cuando te das cuenta de que no tienes salida, de que tu padrasto es un cerdo, de que sabe que su amigo te asedia, de que tu mamá es una estúpida que te pega en lugar de ayudarte a escapar, de que en la escuela te humillan; cuando no puedes llorar, cuando todo el mundo te ha cerrado la puerta en la nariz y te sientas una basura. (Molina 1993, 81)

In this passage Eugenia explains that just about every possible escape a young woman could possess is inaccessible. Her mother, her stepfather, her teachers and her

schoolmates all discard her. She even goes so far as to describe this self-annihilation as true happiness. Here we have the authentic image of the subaltern as portrayed by Spivak, a pointer to an irrecoverable consciousness that nobody understands.

Perhaps even more tragic than the above is that Molina depicts her subaltern characters as locked into their social position. Once a subaltern, always a subaltern appears to be Molina's motif. Two of Molina's narrative techniques that point in this direction are the use of flashbacks and the circularity of her narratives. When writing on the subaltern Molina tends to start at a determined point in a present time of narration and reconstruct a story that is typically based on past events. 'Mentira piadosa' does this by creating a forty-something narrator who is forced to revisit the past events associated with the subaltern world when she is confronted by her old classmate. This enclosing of the subaltern character within the past for the greater part of the narration (though occasionally there are some references to the subaltern's condition in the present) helps to solidify the impression given to the reader that this character has in a sense been fossilized. The narrator is thereby given the ability to travel into the present whereas the marginalized character gives the impression of being left in an unchanging past from which escape appears at best uncertain, if not impossible. This fossilization of the subaltern is reinforced in 'Mentira piadosa' when we see how Carmela views the adult Eugenia as being in an even worse state than she was when young. This is important because it shows that, notwithstanding the large sums of money her third husband is making (illicitly it should be added – another reference to a subaltern world: the criminal one), she remains unable to gain access to the elite groups Carmela frequents. Eugenia is able to shop at their stores, go to their theatres, wear their clothes, and so forth, but she is

unable to gain acceptance from this group. Money cannot buy her freedom from isolation or marginalization: it cannot de-subalternize her. Nor can she find acceptance in her family. Her first husband divorced her, her second husband took her children away from her, and her third husband keeps a lover (Molina 1993, 81). Nothing has changed for Eugenia. If anything is different, it is that her situation has worsened.

Another narrative technique that portrays the subaltern as lacking the ability to change is the motif of circularity. Molina's fiction invariably shows how the subaltern always ends at the same point he or she began. Part of this is due to the flashback technique Molina uses to recreate a narrative that is rooted in the past but which is simultaneously able to suggest that nothing has changed for the subaltern. The story is told and yet the situation is still the same as it was when the narrative began. The reader will often end on literally the same lines that began the narrative. Rather like an ironic *Bildungsroman*, the reader has learned the bitter lesson of experience, but the subaltern has not. The narrator Carmela does let the reader know that she has been mistreated by Eugenia, who abused her innocence and friendship (though, it should be stated, that Carmela did not act with disinterest either). We find out about the terrible predicament in which Eugenia lives, though we are not necessarily encouraged to pity her. However, Carmela shows us that nothing has changed by concluding with exactly the same line she used to start the narrative: 'La observo detenidamente mientras habla. Pienso en lo que ha dicho y callo' (Molina 1993, 67 & 82). The only difference between the two lines is that the last one ends with three ellipses that suggest that this circular cycle will continue to spin indefinitely. The subaltern is caught in a vicious cycle of repeated marginalization.

This brief analysis of the short story, ‘Mentira piadosa’, has allowed us to draw a number of conclusions about Molina’s portrayal of the Mexican subaltern. Firstly her fiction tends to underline that the Mexican bourgeoisie, even when he or she wants to, does not and cannot obtain an intimate knowledge of the subaltern. Try as they might, the élite classes cannot penetrate the inner workings of this sector of society. Secondly, notwithstanding all the signs of solidarity the bourgeoisie might outwardly show towards the subaltern, as it comes closer to the subaltern, its initial curiosity is overwhelmed by repugnance. Thirdly, the subaltern becomes an object of focus only when it is deemed ‘worthy of interest’ by the non-subaltern protagonist. Fourthly, the subaltern in Molina’s fiction is described according to its external factors: i.e. movement and speech, thereby underlining the distance between this class and the upper échelons of society. As we can see, the subaltern typically falls into a pattern in Molina’s fiction: intriguing, sometimes unpredictable, and often repugnant.

El amor que me juraste

Before beginning the analysis of this novel, it is appropriate to give a brief summary of the narrative. *El amor que me juraste* moves between many different locations, but most importantly the majority of the action takes place as a series of past memories the main character, Marcela, has whilst on holiday in San Lázaro in the state of Campeche in southern Mexico. This vacation appeared to have two purposes: the more obvious concerns the elucidation of her family history, while the other focuses on her affair/romance with her lover Eduardo.

The protagonist of the novel is an upper-middle-class woman in her late thirties to early forties. She is married to a successful, hard-working lawyer and together they have

two children who likewise epitomize the bourgeoisie. Life for them was quite normal (though monotonous) until the protagonist's mother falls ill with cancer and slowly degenerates. During that time, a new figure comes into her life: her mother's cardiologist, Eduardo. He is twenty years older than Marcela, triumphant in his field, internationally acclaimed, and married to an important North American art collector and dealer, Ilona Soskay. The doctor, unhappy with his marriage, soon falls in love with Marcela. Upon revealing her feelings to her shortly after her mother's death, Marcela initiates a correspondence with the doctor that gradually leads to their fully-fledged love affair. However, with time and after several encounters, the affair fizzles out and Marcela leaves for Campeche in order to re-evaluate her life and to search for her family roots. More specifically, Marcela goes to Campeche to find out who her father really was and why, while he was alive, he would never talk about the rest of his family. Marcela begins her investigation in the local archives in the municipality where her father lived before marrying and moving to Mexico City. There she is put in contact with a local historian and university professor, Miguel, who provides some clues about her family in that region. The person who really assists Marcela in obtaining some concrete information about her father is a distant uncle whom she had never met before. Thanks to him, Marcela learns that her father belonged to the upper class of that region and, to Marcela's surprise, that her mother was a servant from the lower classes. Marcela also discovers, to her amazement, that her parents had left Campeche because her paternal grandparents could never accept the fact that their son, and heir to their fortune, had married someone of a significantly lower social status. Learning the truth about her parent's past is a terrible blow to Marcela and, whilst trying to come to terms with these new facts, she

meets up again with the local historian, Miguel, who tries to help her accept the subaltern ‘skeletons in her cupboard’. In the end, however, she returns to Mexico City, and her routine of marriage, work, and family, once more dominate her thoughts. We are left with a vision of Marcela, at the conclusion of the novel, trying to forget her affair with the doctor as well as the subaltern side of her family’s past.

One academic whose theories could be seen as offering an avenue of approach for this specific text is John Beverley. In his study *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* the concept of transculturation as coined by the Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz, in his book *Contrapunteo cubano tabaco y azúcar*, is introduced. Beverley suggests that this concept offers the possibility of letting the subaltern voice be heard, as he explains here:

Ortiz meant the term [transculturation] to serve as an alternative to acculturation as a model for the modern evolution of modern Cuban culture out of its colonial past. Whereas in processes of acculturation a subordinate culture has to adjust to a dominant one, in transculturation elements of both cultures come into a dynamic relationship of contradiction and combination. For Ortiz, transculturation designated a social process in which previously antagonistic European, Spanish, and African elements – foods, customs, religious practices, manners, dress, music, and so on – were fused in everyday Cuban life and culture.

(Beverley 1999, 43)

In short, this would mean that the fusion of cultures and traditions would allow the subaltern to achieve representation since it is predicated on the mixing of the dominant élite classes with the marginal classes. This coming together would presumably allow, at least partially, the subaltern to speak in the Spivakian sense because this model presupposes that, in this cultural meshing, the marginal and popular become embedded in the élite, thereby contributing to the mainstream culture. None the less it becomes imperative to indicate that this type of subaltern representation has its limitations because it implies the elimination of marginal cultures and practices from the social hegemony. Applying Ortiz's theory of transculturation to *El amor que me juraste*, could mean that, since the main character, Marcela, is the result of a marriage between an élite and a subaltern member of society, then one should be able to argue that she should be a 'transcultured' character whose hybrid position could authorize her to speak for and represent the subaltern. However, what this statement does not take into account is a situation in which an individual specifically isolates himself from the possibilities of hybridization. This chapter uses *El amor que me juraste* as a test-case allowing us to ascertain that the discourse of transculturation offers at best a displaced access and at worse a false access to subalternity. Indeed, Canclini's previously mentioned theory about certain groups that are more separatist and territorial in their formation of individual identity is more suitable for an analysis of the novel.

It is important to point out that Silvia Molina herself would appear to reject the transculturation. Even though Molina believes that being Mexican and coming from a 'mestiza' culture allows her close contact with the subaltern⁹ (and thus, in a sense, gives her a certain level of expertise and authority to speak, to a certain degree, for the

subaltern) she is also quick to recognize that she is from Mexico's bourgeoisie and that she believes a writer creates best, and most naturally, when writing from a point of view that is closest to his or her own world. In Molina's case the point of view is, clearly, that of Mexico's hegemonic class. Hence, one might assume that, far from creating a hybrid individual whose transcultured 'mestiza' culture authorizes her to represent the subaltern, in *El amor que me juraste* Silvia Molina has created a novel that, although apparently tending to favor the subaltern point of view, ultimately expresses the ideology of the hegemonic class.

Since Marcela's subaltern origins are not obviously brought out until approximately three-fourths of the way through the novel, it becomes imperative to return and review the character searching in the earlier parts of the novel for her roots. At first glance, there does not seem to be anything subaltern about the main characters of this novel. Those who surround Marcela are, indeed, anything but marginal. From the onset, when speaking about her choice of her mother's cardiologist, Marcela clearly establishes that her immediate family is upper class: 'Eduardo era el especialista de moda, y todo el mundo hablaba de él como un médico respectable. Había escrito algunos libros científicos y *comenzaba a ser el cirujano de cabecera de la gente bien*, de universitarios afamados, de políticos, intelectuales y millionarios' (Molina 1999, 24 [my emphasis]). The more the reader learns about Marcela and her life, the more this impression deepens. Her husband, Rafael, is a successful lawyer directing his own thriving firm. He studied a postgraduate degree in the United States, but, at the same time, is actively committed to helping the Zapatistas in Chiapas. Marcela's sons (Rafael and Felipe) excel in the private school they attend and, for most of the novel, are in England perfecting their English

language skills. Marcela's lover, Eduardo, the previously mentioned doctor, is a high-flyer who studied under one of the most important cardiologists in Mexico's history and later did his specialist training at Stanford University. He publishes in important journals, attends international conferences and is esteemed by his colleagues, while at the same time his North American wife, Ilona Soskay, is a renowned art dealer in Mexico and abroad.

The historian and university professor, Miguel, is also far from being subaltern. As a professor at the local university, he encourages the study of the subaltern, but at the same time is an integral part of one of the forces that helps to create subalternity: the academic institution. Marcela's mother, Dolores, though a servant at one point of her life, was being served by one when introduced to the reader. With a woman who waits on her, Dolores' marriage and life-style in the Mexican capital have afforded her a status that few Mexicans can claim to enjoy. Marcela has an important position in a publicity agency and has a secretary to herself at work, whereas at home she enjoys Pancho's assistance: a handyman who assists in the work around the home and her husband's office. The character Marcela never appears to have economic worries and often describes to the reader the many luxuries life affords her: leisurely shopping, trips to other countries, advanced degrees in prestigious universities, and so on. Marcela clearly does not appear to be a member of Mexico's popular classes nor does she associate herself with them.

The only occasion when Marcela had remotely linked her own mother to the popular classes in Mexico was at the time of her mother's death. Marcela remembered her mother's excellent knowledge of popular remedies for ailments:

Viéndola, pensaba que mi madre era una desconocida para mí. Nunca supe más allá de que disfrutaba de cierta sensibilidad para las matas y los animales: cortaba coditos en todas partes y le prendían y le floreaban. Criaba gallinas en la azotea y canarios en el patio, y habríamos educado un perro si nuestra casa no hubiera sido tan modesta y hubiéramos gozado de un jardín. Las vecinas la buscaban por su buena mano con las plantas medicinales, lo que debió aprender de su mamá: sabía curar con masajes, tés y dietas. Aconsejaba agua de zapote blanco contra el insomnio, té de azahar para la rabia, una cucharadita de aceite de olivio para la bilis, buches de albahaca para las aftas, almidón para las rozaduras... Conocía las propiedades de muchas hierbas, y a mis hermanos los frotaba con ruda y romero cuando se lastimaban en el fútbol. Pero del mundo emocional de mi mamá no sabía nada. '[...] nunca me acerqué a ella'. (Molina 1999, 144-45)

This description of Dolores' contact with nature, along with her wisdom in the application of natural medicine, are elements of her character that can be linked to the traditional, and the folkloric often associated with the common people. In Marcela's view her mother was quite simplistic and, though living in the capital of the country, she appeared to be a person who was never able to eliminate her provincial spirit. However, at the same time, the distance between the mother and the daughter begins to emerge. The mother's world was too remote, perhaps too close to popular knowledge, for Marcela to establish a strong emotional link to her.

This fissure, however, did not mean that Marcela was unkind to her mother. When speaking of her mother towards the beginning of the novel (when the mother was still alive) Marcela was quick to romanticize her mother's virtues. She was, after all, the child who decided to take her into her home when the mother fell ill:

¿Qué otras imágenes evocaba? A mi madre en la cocina con un mandil a cuadros cocinando antojitos tabasqueños o lazarinos como tamales de frijol para mis hermanos y pámpano empapelado para mí, [...] a mi madre llevándome de la mano por la Avenida Mazatlán a juntar dátiles que caían de las palmeras de satín azul marino para mi boda; a mi madre bañando por primera vez a mis hijos... [...] Mi madre fue una mujer modesta y tranquila, alguien que nunca exigió para sí nada más allá de lo que obtenía mi papá con su trabajo [...] Siempre nos dio lo que pudo castigarle a sus gastos sin contrariar a mi papá [...] Y estiró siempre sus ahorros para que estudiáramos. (Molina 1999, 32-33)

As her mother's death approaches, Marcela's sympathies become more poignant and even her criticism of her mother diminishes:

‘Se está yendo, pensaba impresionada. Se irá. Ahora sí, se irá.’ Oh Dios, ayúdala. ¡Fue una buena mujer! – rogué y le tomé la mano olvidando para siempre las desavenencias que habíamos tenido. Ella, como todo el mundo, tuvo defectos que yo odiaba como la sobreprotección que le dio a

mis hermanos o como el miedo que le tenía a mi papá. [...] ‘Oh, Dios, ayúdala, ayúdala’, no dejaba de pedir. (Molina 1999, 34-35)

As is evident here, the main character’s attitude towards her mother in the passages can only be described as positive. Marcela’s gushing praise and desire for her mother to die peacefully demonstrate her positive feelings towards her.

On the other hand, Marcela’s portrayal of her father in *El amor que me juraste*, is usually negative. This, she explains, was because of her father’s affair with another woman and the subsequent appearance of new half-brothers born from that relationship. She describes the pain of her father’s death as something that hurt her doubly because, aside from the pain of his deception, he also caused her and her brothers to feel ashamed of their father’s ‘casa chica’ (Molina 1999, 34). Marcela’s lover, Eduardo, brings to light another source of resentment Marcela felt towards her father: ‘La figura de tu padre está vista con dureza. Eres injusto creo. Me atrevo a pensar eso. Déjame decirte que tal vez tu padre no fue ambicioso, lo cual es una virtud poco común en este mundo. Los que son así, viven más felices de lo que te imaginas. Él debió de superar sus frustraciones con la música y la lectura. ¿Quién no aspira a eso?’ (Molina 1999, 78). In this passage, Eduardo underlined the fact that Marcela’s father’s lack of ambition caused Marcela to bear a grudge against her father. It is also evident that Eduardo, a successful man who is very ambitious, is able to empathize with Marcela’s father.

When Marcela learned that her grandparents had disinherited her father because of his marriage with Dolores, her contempt for her father and his family - paradoxically - grew even more: ‘El resentimiento me iba creciendo, conforme se me iban aclarando las

cosas' (Molina 1999, 88). At one point toward the end of the novel she tells Miguel (the university professor who helps her with her genealogical search) about her feelings of rejection toward the paternal side of her family because of how they treated her mother: 'Pues no tengo nada que ver con la familia [de mi padre]. Cuando mi padre se fue de aquí [San Lázaro], cortó su cordón umbilical: ¡Chas! – hice una señal con los dedos de cortar algo como si fueran unas tijeras -. Nunca nos dijo una palabra sobre su gente. Han de haber sido una mierda como los tíos [paternos]' (Molina 1999, 122). Later, when Miguel insists on her accepting her family for what it is (and was), she emphasizes once more: 'Mi abuelo ha de haber sido un amargado; y, si quieres que te lo diga, odio a mi padre...' (Molina, 1999, 129). Marcela's family's rejection of her mother appears to be too strong for her to assimilate. Even at the end of the novel, the protagonist is still unable to forgive her father and his side of the family for what they had done: 'A lo mejor más adelante, alguna tarde, alguna noche, sienta deseos otra vez de mirar hacia mi pasado; tal vez entonces habré perdonado al abuelo y a mi papá [...]' (Molina 1999, 166).

Having considered Marcela's viewpoints on each of her parents, we can see that she tends to see her mother's side more favorably, whereas, her father is viewed in a negative light. It would appear therefore, that, at first glance, Marcela was more sympathetic towards her mother's subaltern world. However, as we shall see, this is not the case at all. Although her words tell one story, her actions tell another. In the first place, throughout the novel, Marcela considers herself *gente de bien* and conducts herself in a way that conforms with other members of that social stratum.

Ironically, one of the vices in her father's behavior that Marcela despises and criticizes the most, was the one to which she also succumbed: marital infidelity. Early in

the novel, Marcela is quick to note that one of the principal reasons she hates her father is because he cheated on her mother. None the less, when she has an affair with the heart surgeon, she does so without any apparent feelings of guilt:

La reservación estaba a su nombre y cuando firmé mi entrada frente a una chica hispana que hablaba en un español sin acento definido, me dijo que mi esposo regresaría por la noche, que había ido a instalarse temprano, a dejar todo listo para mi llegada. Caminé tranquila y feliz hacia el elevador. Era la primera vez que mentir sobre mi relación amorosa con Eduardo no me dolía o, mejor dicho, no me avergonzaba. Estaba segura de que merecía ese espacio en mi vida, ese cariño. Esa amistad. (Molina 1999, 140-41)

This is the biggest contradiction of her character. Marcela felt she deserved her adulterous relationship. This is ironically the same type of 'enlace' that caused, pain and anger in the protagonist throughout the narrative. Throughout the novel Marcela insists on the fact that she hates her father for being unfaithful to his spouse, but in the end, it is his example that she follows. This protagonist's words and actions constantly belie each other. Like Machado De Assis' *Dom Casmurro* (1899), the protagonist of this novel is blind to her own follies.

There is, indeed, no hybridity in this character. Marcela does not straddle the borders of the bourgeois and the subaltern. She does not easily move from one class to another, nor does she appear to understand the subaltern. Based on the above, it is easy

to conclude that Marcela does not fall into Canclini's category of a pluralistic and hybrid mainstream in Latin America and Mexico, but fits rather his description of those who attempt to identify themselves as apart from the hybrid mainstream by differentiating themselves from others. The protagonist's one-sidedness is best demonstrated in the way Marcela treated the subaltern when she visited Campeche. One of the main reasons Marcela went to Campeche was to obtain more information about her father's family. Upon arrival she soon found out that her father's family used to be one of the most violent and powerful in the region. None the less, when Marcela discovered from one of her uncles that her mother was not accepted by her paternal grandparents because she was a servant she felt: '*rencor y rabia*' (Molina 1999, 87). These sentiments of rejection and anger demonstrate her inability to assimilate either or the subaltern and upper class components of her family history. On the contrary, her emotions seem only to portray more vividly the rejection she feels for that side of her family which belongs to the margins of society.

Marcela, who is the product of a combination of high and low classes and cultures, so to speak, rejects hybridity and identifies with the Mexican bourgeoisie. None the less, her parents' decisions did change their own lives. Though many of the basic character traits of these individuals did remain unaltered, marrying and moving to the capital did have an effect on them. On moving to Mexico City, Dolores lost some of her subaltern status. She was no longer known as a servant. The anonymity of the metropolis helped to erase that part of her past. A somewhat opposite effect occurred in the life of the husband. On leaving Campeche, Marcela's father lost much of the social power and prestige that he once possessed. Outside the Yucatan peninsula he was, in many aspects,

just another inhabitant of the large capital. However, the knowledge his education and upbringing bestowed on him allowed him to acquire a job which, while arguably less important than the one he would have had in Campeche, was still respectable. However, notwithstanding the 'leveling' effect Marcela's parents' move to Mexico City had on the family, their daughter was still able to observe differences between the two, which she was then able to explain more fully after having learned additional information about her family's past.

When comparing the cycle of social strata, rebellion, and subalternity in Marcela's and her lover's family an intriguing pattern develops. In Marcela's family the paternal grandfather was a wealthy landowner who possessed a great deal of power in the Mexican province. In Eduardo's family, basically the same situation existed. In both cases the male heir of the family rejected the grandfather's way of life in order to pursue his desires. Both of these instances involved the popular classes. In Marcela's family her father wanted to marry a servant. In Eduardo's case, this man's father wanted to educate the rural farmers and farm-workers. The father of both Eduardo's and Marcela - directly, or indirectly, intentionally, or unintentionally - linked their life to the popular and, in a sense, discarded their hegemonic inheritance. However, in these two instances, the children, Marcela and Eduardo, have appeared to return to their dominant inheritance, so to speak. In this instance this generation has succeeded in obtaining a place within the hegemonic classes in the Mexican capital, instead of the provinces. They are no longer high-powered landowners like their grandparents, but rather high-status professionals. The situation is similar with respect to their possession of hegemonic power, but the more recent generation is more sophisticated. It could be argued thus that, in this novel the

mixing between classes, or hybridization, only lasts one generation. The dominant trend for the main characters in this novel is to strive to achieve a hegemonic status.

When referring to the subaltern and how it is represented within *El amor que me juraste* it is appropriate to begin with the subalterns in Marcela's family. Although it could be said that Marcela's mother is not a subaltern due to the fact that she married a man from the bourgeoisie and, for the most part, left behind her life as a subaltern, she is however, linked to the subaltern classes of society because of her origins and because she is seen in the narrative as someone who never fully transcended her life as a *campesina*. In other words, Dolores is viewed as a woman who, even though she has left the country, remains somewhat locked into her past. Her daughter shared with the reader some of the characteristics that linked her mother to that way of life. Even though Dolores lived in the Mexican capital she raised chickens and sold the eggs 'como si viviéramos en el pueblo' (Molina 1999, 93) and went out with Marcela to collect the dates that had fallen from the palm trees that line the *camellones* of streets in Mexico City (Molina 1999, 32).

Dolores' physical representation within the novel is necessarily limited; Dolores died early in the narration and the information about her life is extracted mainly from Marcela's recollection. From there (and even during the time in which she was alive during the novel) Dolores existed, for the most part, as a passing memory in her daughter's mind – even when she was a physical presence in Marcela's home. True to the model found in Molina's narratives on the subaltern, it is the level of interest shown in them by the *élite* which determines the extent of the subaltern narrative development. This can be viewed in the novel in several different ways. Dolores never really speaks during the novel. She only speaks on a few limited occasions, mostly to answer questions

related to her cardiologist's curiosity about Dolores' experiences living in the Mexican state of Tabasco while growing up. Note that in this instance it is an hegemonic character who has taken interest in the mother and elicits speech from her. True to the manner in which many servants are trained, she only tends to speak when spoken to. (It is also worth underlining that in this novel, Dolores' other children - two sons - and their families did not even come to visit their mother/grandmother, exhibiting a further lack of interest in this subaltern character.) What is more, Marcela takes occasion more than once to emphasize that she and her mother did not communicate well. Marcela demonstrated this to be the case when she was a young girl living at home as well as when she was older and taking care of her mother. One example from her youth demonstrates this point. When Marcela's menstruation began her mother gave Marcela a family heirloom associated with the notion of coming of age instead of explaining to her what was happening (Molina 1999, 32). (This example of lack of communication between mother and daughter with specific reference to the inability or unwillingness of the mother to explain the act of menstruation to her daughter also occurs in 'Mentira piadosa' when the protagonist Carmela menstruates for the first time and the mother offers no concrete explanation for this event (Molina 1993, 77).) However, the most poignant example of the lack of communication – and, therefore, inability of the bourgeoisie to hear the subaltern voice in this novel -- occurred later on in Marcela's life when she tried to get her mother to talk about her father's infidelity. When all attempts prove futile she explains: 'No insistí. Era su secreto. Si nunca hablamos, no esperaba que de pronto me abriera el corazón' (Molina 1999, 144). This is perhaps one of the best examples within the novel of why Marcela cannot be described as a go-between in mediating subalternity

and the bourgeoisie; rather she is a character who was so distant from her mother's reality that she did not understand her or her world at all. More importantly, it probably best explains Marcela's reasons for describing her mother as '*una desconocida para mí*' (Molina 1999, 144).

Another example that indicates the protagonist's blindness with respect to the subaltern is evident when the mother's cancer begins to affect her speech. Suddenly, for a short time, no one is able to understand what she is saying. Then, one day the young son is able to decipher his grandmother's garbled speech. The fact that the young boy is the one who is able to interpret what his grandmother is saying appears to be significant because, firstly it suggests that Marcela is out of touch with her mother. Secondly, this incident suggests regression in Dolores' character. Now, she is only understood by minors, her speech is no longer comprehended in the sophisticated bourgeois world her daughter inhabits. The bridge of communication remains inaccessible to them.

This sense of incommunicability between the mother and the rest of the people who occupy the same physical sphere as her help to build the sense of isolation surrounding this character. Typical of Molina's subaltern protagonists, Marcela's mother is quite isolated from those around her. Her daughter does not appear truly to understand her. Her other children do not visit her. Her late husband chose to maintain extramarital affairs. Physically she was isolated from her family in southern Mexico. All of these different, yet overarching, factors help to create a feeling of isolation that encapsulate this specific character.

Within Marcela's family, there are two other individuals who should not go unmentioned: Marcela's grandparents. Although they are only present via photographs in the novel, they supply important information about Dolores' roots:

De la familia de mi mamá salieron las dos fotos que yo recordaba en su mesita de noche: unos ovalitos color sepia: el abuelo con su sombrero de palma puesto, un poco de lado, y su bigote retorcido hacia arriba; y la abuela con un vestido sin mangas y el cabello tejido en una trenza que le caía hacia delante, sobre el pecho. No había olvidado a la abuela en esa foto: seria o asustada por la cámara. (Molina 1999, 163)

This passage shows Marcela's grandparents as traditional and provincial. The grandfather with his handlebar moustache and his askew, straw hat and the grandmother with her sleeveless dress and her single braid do not suggest social sophistication. The grandmother in particular appears uncultured because of her fear of the camera. It is noteworthy that this description of the maternal grandparents comes after Marcela's discovery that her mother was once a servant. Whereas before, differences between her mother and others were looked upon fondly or positively by Marcela, after the discovery of her past they are viewed more negatively. Having learned about her mother's subaltern origins, Marcela becomes more critical of her. Instead Marcela has definitely chosen to identify herself with her bourgeois past.

Another subaltern in *El amor que me juraste* to consider is Marcela's own handy man and personal assistant, Pancho. He does not have a sustained dialogue in any part of

the narrative, but rather is limited to a couple of isolated comments given mostly when responding to an order. In this sense, Pancho does not have a voice. Thus, this treatment of Pancho accords with Molina's narrator's treatment of the subaltern. Though necessary for the maintaining of order in the protagonist's home, Pancho is not viewed as possessing any interesting qualities. This character is not developed. He is something of a ghostly presence within the narrative.

Rafael, Marcela's husband, is afflicted with 'subaltern blindness'. He worked with many subalterns in his home state of Chiapas. There he labored with the indigenous community in order to help them to recover their farmlands (a political theme that attracted a lot of attention at the time this novel was published). Rafael at first sees them as self-made intellectuals: '[Rafael] decía que los campesinos que se habían unido a la guerrilla ya eran indígenas con cierta educación autodidacta y que habían aprendido mucho con las políticas rurales de autogestión' (Molina 1999, 139). Nevertheless, the same people are also portrayed as primitive since they pay for Rafael's legal services with a chicken or a pig. Rafael, though initially sympathetic, eventually gives up on this subaltern group's cause showing himself to be 'harto y desilusionado' (Molina 1999, 168) with the people. Much like Carmela in 'Mentira piadosa' the closer Rafael came to the subaltern classes the less interest he had in associating himself with them; hence, following the pattern outlined previously, they eventually 'fade' from the narrative.

When discussing the subaltern characters in this novel, it is important to note that Marcela is not particularly interested in the subaltern either. Marcela's encounter with the subaltern elements of her mother's past is due to the fact that she is primarily focused on obtaining information about her own father. However, in the latter half of the novel, after

Marcela discovers that her mother's family has subaltern origins, she comes into contact with Miguel. This character introduces Marcela to a new type of subaltern and offers her his own philosophy on how to view the subaltern. He is fascinated by the fact that several people on the bourgeois side of Marcela's family intermixed with subalterns (and in particular, indigenous and black people) living in San Lázaro. Marcela -- though not interested in learning more about her family history -- agrees to let Miguel take her on a tour of San Lázaro. What follows is a glimpse of the whole city that sharply contrasts with the view that the reader had previously received from the narrator. The historian described his tour to Marcela as 'un retrato de cuerpo entero' and added 'ya que no te dieron el de tu abuelo' (Molina 1999, 150). This phrase becomes fundamental in understanding the reasons why he insists on showing Marcela the undesirable parts of the city as well as the famous tourist attractions. Here Miguel plays the part of a social historian who attempts to teach the protagonist a lesson about the entire population. To do so, he begins by taking Marcela in his sports car to a place where there is a splendid view of the city, and from there he drives her to the most affluent residential areas of San Lázaro. This idyllic vision is destroyed when she arrives in the areas where the lower/marginal classes live. Miguel takes her to a zone which Molina has (one could assume, not so coincidentally) named 'Despertar'. After bringing her to this area where: 'la gente [vive] que tiene otros rostros, otra mirada, otra manera de vestir y de caminar, la que huele a maíz, la que llega del interior en busca de trabajo' (Molina, 1999, 128). Marcela is repulsed by what she sees: 'Ya vámonos de aquí' (Molina 1999, 129). Faced with the irrefutable 'evidence' of the existence of the subaltern, Marcela is forced to abandon her blindness, even if it is only momentarily. Nonetheless, far from accepting,

she pleads to be distanced from this reality. Miguel, however, reads her thoughts and points to the hidden subaltern reality that exists in every family: 'Todas las familias tienen su cadáver escondido – me tomó la mano Miguel, solidario' (Molina 1999, 129). Miguel, - who gives further meaning as to why this incident should occur in a zone of the city named 'Despertar' -, appears to want to encourage Marcela to 'wake up' and realize that subalternity cannot be swept under the carpet. During the course of the night Miguel continues his tour 'de cuerpo entero'; taking Marcela to beautiful areas such as the Malecón; once again he contrasts the beautiful with other less desirable zones such as the red light district where a different type of subaltern exists: that of the sex industry. Miguel is portrayed as determined to make Marcela recognize that the subaltern is a part of the human family. The final message this historian conveys to the protagonist appears to promote a pluralistic view of society and an abandonment of her élitist ideology when he says: 'Acéptate' (Molina 1999, 155). Miguel wants Marcela to accept herself as she is (a mix of different classes) and not to flee from the elements of her families past that repulse her.

In the end, however, Marcela does not take Miguel's advice even though she enjoyed his company, as if he were her 'ángel de la guarda' (Molina 1999, 151). Marcela soon returns from San Lázaro to Mexico City, where she does attempt to make her past disappear. One of the more significant actions she takes in symbolically eliminating her subaltern past is to give away to an art dealer a priceless indigenous shawl that she had inherited from her mother's family. Earlier on in the novel, Marcela had casually shown a hand-woven shawl to an important American art collector (who was also the wife of Marcela's lover). At that point in time she appeared to esteem the family heirloom even

more after having seen it highly valued by the expert. Nevertheless, after discovering the truth about the origins of her family the protagonist is willing to give the shawl to the art dealer for free (on the pretext that she has done so in penitence for having an affair with this woman's husband). However, the symbolism of her giving away the shawl (a treasure from the subaltern side of her family) to the American art dealer (symbol of a mighty hegemonic power) deserves some comment. The lack of reverence Marcela shows for this article is significant. By refusing to accept her subaltern past, Marcela reveals that - at the deepest level – she continues to be bourgeois and reaffirms this specific territory as the only one she chooses to occupy.

Miguel's character within this narrative is worth considering because he appears to represent institutionality itself, more specifically, the academic institutions that study the subaltern and its reaction to these characters. Unlike the bourgeoisie in this novel, he is seen as knowing the subaltern and the hegemonic in a more intimate sense. It could be argued that in his words and actions previously mentioned he advocated that the bourgeoisie should understand, learn more about, and accept the existence of the subaltern. Specifically, this character has embarked on a study of hegemony, subalternity and hybridity as he studied the historically powerful families. On the one hand he promotes the study of mixing of the subaltern with the hegemonic, and on the other, he recognizes their presence and importance in Campechean society in general. Nevertheless, he does not offer any solutions as to how to integrate the subaltern fully into society. His role is limited to one of acknowledging that the subaltern is a part of society and that they should be included in society. Miguel's role in the novel is noteworthy because, while it epitomizes this novel's opinion about how institutions view

the subaltern, it also demonstrates that the author is aware of different points of view with respect to subaltern studies. Through this character Molina reveals to the reader that not only is she conscious of the élite views of subalternity but of those that can be found in the academic world as well. The ideology of this text indicates that it is aware of the subaltern and where they are located (at least to the same degree Molina's character Miguel does) and that if it does not represent the subaltern with the protagonist this is for a specific purpose. Given the previous discussion, this chapter argues that one of the aims of this novel is to create a character who physically comes from a mixed subaltern/bourgeois background in cultural terms but who does not represent or speak for the subaltern. In this case, Marcela does not follow the transculturation patterns outlined earlier. Her behavior corresponds, rather to the postulate Canclini presents in his study, Marcela has chosen, culturally at the very least, to be a part of a sector of society that aligns itself with the those who: '[...] search for new signs in order to differentiate themselves from others' (Canclini 1995, 266).

As we have seen, the voice of the subaltern is mimicked rather than expressed in *El amor que me juraste*. This mimicry is evident in the novel by the gaps and fissures in the representation of the subaltern. Those subjects within the novel who could be considered subaltern, the indigenous Mexicans, the poor, the servants who take part in this novel are invisible. Theirs is a ghostly existence throughout the whole novel. Their characters are never developed, or portrayed with depth, and in some cases (as is the case with Marcela when she is faced with the awful reality of how the subaltern live in her ancestral town of San Lázaro) they are metaphorically eschewed as if they were phantoms. As argued earlier, this is one of the characteristics that marks Molina's fiction

on the subaltern. When the subaltern does not possess any outstanding qualities that specifically attract the élite protagonists, they are simply ignored. This behavior can be observed in Marcela's subaltern family. Marcela's mother, Dolores, was ignored by her two sons and their families even before they became aware of her subaltern origins. The children appear to have found their mother uninteresting. Her daughter Marcela claims to have never really known her mother at all. Dolores was portrayed as a woman who never adapted properly to life in the Mexican Capital and who tried to bring the country into her city existence. She has no real dialogue in the novel and her voice is limited to answering a few questions asked by her cardiologist. She is more notable for her silence than for her speech. In summary this novel's elusive portrayal of the subaltern is perhaps the best indicator that the subaltern does not speak in this narrative because the élite protagonists have blinded themselves to them.

When referring to Marcela's trip to Southern Mexico it is difficult not to see the biblical symbolism as the main character travels to San Lázaro with the hope of resurrecting her father's past. Only, to Marcela's surprise, when she succeeds in doing so, her mother's past is also resurrected in the process. Unfortunately, the protagonist finds her mother's origins too uncomfortable to accept and wants to return to her former state of ignorance. However, the past cannot be undone.

In several different ways, *El amor que me juraste* subverts what could be called a *telenovela*¹⁰ response to the situations presented in this novel. The *telenovela* reply would have most likely followed a scheme similar to this one. The rich man would have married the poor servant without any problems (or possibly a few which would have been easily overcome as the plot required). The children would have grown up to be adults able to

appreciate and love the popular roots of their mother while taking advantage of all the social benefits the father offered: the perfect hybrid ready for general consumption by the public. The bourgeois parents who were angered by their son's marriage to the subaltern would have reconciled any differences with their son and daughter-in-law. In short, they would have lived happily ever after. This was not the case in Molina's novel; the textual reality presented here is quite different from the 'ideal' world described above. The children rejected the mother's subaltern origins while clinging to their father's bourgeois lifestyle. Those who disapproved of Marcela's parents' marriage never established contact again. In short, this couple was marginalized and rejected for breaking the rules established by elite society. Marcela, after learning the truth of her mother's past, did her best to erase it. Thus, she did not tell her family of her findings, gave away her mother's shawl, and returned whole-heartily to her upper-middle-class lifestyle.

Amongst other issues, *El amor que me juraste* demonstrates that individuals who come from a mixed background do not always form a hybrid character who, as the quote at the beginning of this analysis suggested, 'allows the subaltern to speak'. In this case, Molina has created a character who has definitively come from parents of a different social stratum. However, instead of mixing and becoming a character who possesses the ability to transfer between both worlds and at the same time speak for both sides, Marcela opts for the route out of subalternity to the upper échelons of society. An anthropological study published by Freeman offers a suggestion as to why this might be the case.

On the basis of evidence from many stratified societies, Berreman concludes that 'no group of people is content to be low in a caste hierarchy – to live a life of inherited deprivation and subjection – regardless of the

apparent stability of the system and regardless of the rationalisations offered by their superiors or constructed by themselves'. (Freeman 1979, 397)

The above passage suggests that it should not come as a surprise that an individual who has the option of choosing with which class to identify his own self would choose the hegemonic class since doing otherwise could imply relinquishing the privilege to represent oneself to the hegemony. This would explain the pattern with respect to Marcela's and Eduardo's life described earlier. Their behavior could be explained as the norm whilst their parent's conduct could be viewed as atypical.

Overall, *El amor que me juraste* is a novel that follows the basic scheme Molina has used previously to write about the subaltern. Perhaps one of the more unique features of this novel is evident in how the protagonist reacts when she discovers subalternity relatively close to herself and her own family. In Molina's other texts the subaltern subject is a distant object of examination, whereas in *El amor que me juraste* it attempts to invade her personal life. Faced by such a threat Marcela's response is much more violent than others Molina has created in her narratives. An unique aspect of this work is the presence of the university professor Miguel. As a character who promotes solidarity with the subaltern (though in the novel he does not offer any concrete evidence that he actually does so – aside from pointing out that they exist and that we should not forget them) this professor helps to underline the hypocrisy of the élite characters in the novels. Above all, this personage underscores the characteristics of the élite and the elusiveness of the subaltern. Miguel becomes a point of contrast between the slippery subaltern and the élite who lose their interest in the subaltern once their initial novelty has disappeared.

Ascensión Tun

Of all the novels Silvia Molina has written, perhaps the one that has received the most attention from literary critics has been *Ascensión Tun*. What makes this narrative so unique is that it is the only narrative Molina has created to date with a member of the subaltern classes as its principal protagonist. Nonetheless, as emphasized at the beginning of this chapter, no one has analyzed this narrative in the light of subaltern studies.¹¹ One of the ways in which this novel is different from other narratives by Molina reviewed thus far is that several of the main characters are subalterns. This creates the opportunity to observe and carefully test the analytical model presented with ‘Mentira piadosa’. In addition it allows us to assess how these characters are portrayed and represented and especially, to answer the question: Do the subaltern characters in this novel actually speak in a Spivakian sense, or is someone else using them to express his/her ideology?

However, before attempting to answer this question, it is appropriate to begin with a brief summary of the narrative in question. As with the text previously studied in this chapter, *Ascensión Tun* also begins in contemporary times in the state of Campeche, Mexico. It is there that the narrator is trying to find out the truth concerning the history of an individual named Ascensión Tun. The person investigating the subject is either an anthropologist or a historian. A minimal amount of information is provided about this character, and we are only able to infer that the researcher is a woman when another lady she is conversing with refers to her as ‘niña’ (Molina 1993a, 10). At first, the investigator interviews a local citizen of the community in order to find out more about this ‘santo’ Ascensión Tun (Molina 1993a, 9). It appears that this character’s focus involves discovering ‘the truth’ behind a local myth. Nevertheless when her methods are not able to find the concrete detail she desires from the people with whom she speaks, she decides

to consult the *Biblioteca Municipal* and search for the information in the archives. There the investigator ‘compr[ueba] la historia de Ascensión’ (Molina 1993a, 12). After doing so, this woman then ‘opens up’ the archives to the reader and shares with him what was written with respect to this person and the incidents surrounding his life and death.

Ascensión Tun was a young Mayan boy who lived in the Yucatan peninsula in the late 1800s. In 1889 - when Ascensión was only eleven years old - he became an orphan after his parents died as victims of a hurricane that passed through the region where they lived. The boy, as an orphan, became the property of the state and was sent to live in ‘la Casa de Beneficencia’, a state-run home for orphans and others who could not take care of themselves otherwise. Upon arriving at the home, Ascensión meets don Mateo, the director; Josefa and Antonio, a couple who worked at the Casa, Capellán, the priest assigned to the Casa, and doña María, the house’s administrator.

In addition to these protagonists, there are many nameless interns along with two other marginal individuals who are being taken care of at the Casa de Beneficencia whose characters are more developed in the novel: Consuelo, a middle aged woman who suffers from dementia, and an elderly Mayan shaman, Juan Bautista. These two members are important to the novel and to the protagonist Ascensión Tun, but they are quite marginal in societal terms. Since this is the story that describes what happens from day to day in a government welfare home it is perhaps understandable that not very many exciting episodes take place. One of the ways in which this narrative provides a little more variety for the reader is that since Don Mateo, the director, has written the account he includes fragments of his own personal memories as well as long dissertations on ‘La guerra de las castas’, a war between the Mayan Indians and the ‘Mexicans’ that took place in the

1800s. In addition to those elements, the narrator includes Consuelo's personal history as well as the reason why she suffered from insanity.

The main event of the story occurs soon after Ascensión's arrival, when he meets Juan Bautista and an instant bond of friendship is formed. Juan Bautista takes it upon himself to pass on to this boy the knowledge he accumulated during his time as a shaman. However, aside from this friendship, he does not seem particularly fond of anyone else in the institution and soon begins to plan his escape from his new home and its monotonous routine. Consuelo discovers his plans and promises to help him, but Ascensión's project is cut short by a tragic incident that kills the young boy and brings the novel to an abrupt close.

It was mentioned above that *Ascensión Tun* is unique within Molina's oeuvre because its protagonist is a subaltern. But it has clear similarities with novels by Elena Poniatowska like *Hasta no verte Jesús*, *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela*, and, *Gaby Brimmer*. *Ascensión Tun* is different since it was not based on a real individual in the sense that *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* was. At the same time, it is important and interesting to note that, Silvia Molina did admit that she based the subaltern character Ascensión Tun on herself:

Es muy largo de explicar, pero Ascensión Tun soy yo, el niño huérfano de San Roman. Yo viví esa experiencia, cuando hacía una investigación sobre mi padre, un personaje muy conocido en Campeche [...].¹²

Having stated the above, it is imperative to decide if the subaltern could be represented by an author who is a non-subaltern. Literary critic, Angel Rama, whereby it would be possible for the subaltern to speak in a text created by a bourgeois writer. Rama explains:

El autor se ha reintegrado a la comunidad lingüística y habla desde ella, con desembarazado uso de sus recursos idiomáticos. Si esa comunidad es, como ocurre frecuentemente, de tipo rural, o aun colinda con una de tipo indígena, es a partir de su sistema lingüística que trabaja el escritor, quien no procura imitar desde fuera un habla regional, sino elaborarla desde dentro con una finalidad artística. Desde el momento que no se percibe a sí mismo fuera de ella, sino que la reconoce sin rubor ni disminución como propia, abandona la copia, con cuidada caligrafía, de sus irregularidades, sus variantes respecto a una norma académica externa y en cambio investiga las posibilidades que le proporciona para construir una específica lengua literaria dentro de su marco. (Rama 1982, 42-43)

In his study *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory*, Beverley has underlined this method as a manner in which the subaltern is able to gain some degree of ‘speech’ through literature. In this case, if a fictional writer (a brilliant fictional writer, that is) incorporates the subaltern forms of discourse within his narrative he is, in Rama’s view, able to capture some of the subaltern’s voice and in that respect represent the subaltern (though the subaltern is relativized by the dominant writer).

Notwithstanding this, before attempting to apply this theory to *Ascensión Tun* in order to

claim it has the ability to represent the subaltern it will be useful to review some important components of the introductory chapter as they elucidate the argument that follows here.

The episode between the local figure and the historian at the beginning of *Ascensión Tun* contains a key element for analyzing this novel, that is, the preference the investigator has given to the archives (the official, institutional version of events) as opposed to the popular oral account of the history of Ascensión Tun. In the first instance, the investigator interviewed a local resident who was personally connected to the incident in question (which concerned Josefa's daughter) in order to obtain the information she needed to document the incidents around Ascensión's life in the Casa de Beneficencia. After some time, however, she grew to distrust the oral version of the boy's life. 'Me gustaría decirle [a la hija de Josefa]: "La historia de Ascensión Tun se ha ido forjando a base de muchos agregados, de ninguna manera podría ser la original"' (Molina 1993a, 10). This investigator is afraid of the possibility that all of the additions incorporated during the oral transmission of this story could have corrupted the 'true story', so to speak. The academically trained professional shows her preference for the written word. So how are we able to understand the researcher's decision to consult the municipal library? It was in order to rectify the oral version of events she had received from the local woman. There she found what she was looking for and, using this as her guide, she was then able to provide the reader with a new version of the events:

Más tarde me despido y por última vez atravieso el patio de los naranjos.

Voy rumbo a la Biblioteca Municipal pensando que la hija de Josefa ha

convertido a Ascensión en un mito, y no hay tal, me digo. Ni elevación, ni santidad, ni nada, me vuelvo a decir. En los archivos de la Casa de Beneficencia y en el manuscrito de don Mateo comprobé la historia de Ascensión. No era la que me relató la hija de Josefa; es una historia más sobrecogedora y triste. (Molina 1993a, 11-12)

From the beginning of the novel, this passage establishes the narrator's preference for the hegemonic written version of events that form a part of the institution (the library) as opposed to the verbal, popular, or subaltern, account (i.e. Josefa's daughter's account). Although the narrator finds the oral version fascinating (Molina 1993a, 10) at the same time she does not trust it. In her attempt to eliminate what she has called the mythical aspects of Ascension Tun's history she has placed greater faith in the institution and its hegemony in order to establish the 'truth'. Rama's theory of the transmission of knowledge is highly relevant here. We now know that the character who selected the texts that compose the version of Ascension Tun's life the reader receives, does not effectively credit any of the oral accounts although she does listen to and is inspired by them. Interestingly enough she does seek out the 'oral version of events'. There is thus, clearly an effort on this researcher's part with respect to including oral discourse in her search for the truth. However, a detailed review of how the subaltern is represented in this novel does show some ability to represent certain elements of the subaltern, and it clearly demonstrates other characteristics that have been identified as qualities of the subaltern.

Precisely one of the ways in which *Ascensión Tun* is unique within Silvia Molina's oeuvre is the way in which it represents the subaltern. This is because this novel has essentially six main characters, three of whom may be considered subaltern and the other three of whom are non-subaltern. If the reader is to study the way in which the subaltern figures are portrayed in this novel, and is then to compare them with the non-subaltern, important differences emerge. The next segment of this chapter will analyze these six characters, consider their representation within the novel, and offer reasons why the subaltern individuals are portrayed distinctly from the hegemonic characters.

One of the most important characters in this story is the director of the Casa de Beneficencia, Don Mateo Solís. He is, first and foremost, a poet and journalist who became the director of the home due to his political merits. Don Mateo is from Campeche, and throughout the novel he is a central character because he oversaw this governmental institution. Although occasionally withdrawing to his quarters in order to write his memoirs, he is in constant contact with the other members of the house, including Ascensión Tun. His character is well portrayed and the reader is able to penetrate his thoughts and even has access to his memoirs. The lengthy discussions Don Mateo maintains with other members of his staff on a variety of topics ensures that he becomes a well-rounded character for the reader. This helps to make this individual appear convincing. In a private interview Silvia Molina has given some reasons as to why this character seems so real. She explained how this was achieved by sharing details on the creative process of this individual. Though long, this extract from an interview is critical for an understanding of this point:

NG: ¿Hay algún tipo de personaje que Ud. no se atrevería a poner en su novela? ¿Algún tipo de personaje que Ud. no quisiera representar, simplemente porque no se sentiría capaz de hacerlo?

SM: Bueno, pues sí me ha pasado. He intentado hacer, por ejemplo, en mi novela *El amor que me juraste* que el narrador fuera el médico. No pude. De hecho, la primera versión de la novela estaba narrada por el doctor. Pero yo misma no lo creí. Llegó el momento en que no me sonaba realmente verosímil. No sabía yo si el personaje realmente fuera a reaccionar así ¿no? No estuve ni contenta con el trabajo. Entonces decidí volver a hacer la novela con el punto de vista de la narradora ¿no? Porque es algo que me sale más de dentro ¿no? Me sale más natural. Siento que lo puedo manejar un poco mejor ¿no? No quise decir que no pueda manejar los personajes masculinos. Porque, por ejemplo, en *Ascensión Tun* está el director de la Casa de Beneficiencia que hace sus memorias. Yo me acuerdo que esa novela la hice en un taller que en la que era coordinador Juan Rulfo. Estaba Juan Rulfo, Salvador Alisondro, y un maestro que se llamaba Francisco Montero. Y un día Juan Rulfo me dijo: ‘Oiga Silvia, ¿cómo le hace para meterse en la mente del personaje para hacerse unas memorias así?’ Le dije: ‘No sé realmente no, un poco, no sé cómo le hace uno.’ Pero, entonces nunca dudé que pudiera ser verosímil. En cambio, con esta novela [*El amor que me juraste*], no pude, no pude meterme dentro de ese personaje.

NG: Yo noto que cuando, por ejemplo en la novela *Ascensión Tun*, usted se mete en la cabeza como por ejemplo del director y de doña María usted se mete en sus pensamientos y explica al narratario lo que piensa qué está sucediendo.

SM: Es que tienes un modelo. Por ejemplo yo para el director de la Casa de Beneficiencia, estudié muy bien a un director de Cine Mexicano, que fue un director de cine clásico para nosotros que se llama Juan Bustillos. Fue el director de algunas películas, como por ejemplo de Cantinflas, pero fue director de muchas películas, como te digo, del cine clásico. Entonces yo lo veía todos los viernes. Teníamos una tertulia, un grupo que nos juntábamos todos los viernes, y durante cinco años yo creo, todos los viernes, todos los viernes. Y el personaje del director estaba inspirado en Juan, yo estudiaba a Juan porque me lo imaginaba como el director de la Casa de Beneficiencia. Juan escribió después sus memorias cinematográficas, y yo me fijaba cómo construía sus memorias, digamos ¿no? Y lo que te decía, si yo no hubiera tenido un modelo cerca a quién imitar y alguien poder transformar, no habría podido hacerlo. (ISM)

Silvia Molina describes that Don Mateo was based on a person she knew well as a director, Juan Bustillos. This chapter argues that this character is credible precisely because he is based on concrete historical reality. In a letter Silvia Molina also claimed to

have carried out some historical research in order to situate and understand the characters: '[...] hice una investigación histórica para situar y entender a los personajes'.¹³ This is evident in the representation of this and the rest of the characters.

One of the other prominent non-subaltern figures in *Ascensión Tun* is Agustín Cepeda, best known within the novel as Capellán, or Chaplain in English. This priest was assigned to the chaplaincy within the Casa de Beneficencia itself and is one of the characters who has the most interaction with Don Mateo and Ascensión Tun. Capellán is portrayed effectively in the novel and is characterized by his concern for Ascensión Tun, the only young person in the home:

Lo que me trae ante ti, hoy, es implorarte clemencia por el niño Tun, el más pequeño de tus hijos. Si lo salvaste de la inundación es seguramente porque le tienes reservado un lugar especial en este valle de lágrimas. Lo he visto sufrir, francamente no debería estar aquí, rodeado de viejos. Necesita de tu misericordia para aceptar una vida tan triste, lejos de los niños de su edad. (Molina 1993a, 48)

Molina has been able to create a detailed picture of this man and his thoughts much in the same way she does with Don Mateo. Whereas in the case of Don Mateo much of his personal individuality emerges in his thoughts and memoirs, in the case of the Capellán, the reader is allowed an insider's view by being allowed inside the prayers of this priest. From this it is possible to say that the same technique is used for the Chaplain as for the other non-subaltern characters. Though the method may vary the reader is allowed to

eavesdrop on the Chaplain's thoughts and catch an intimate glimpse of his character in a way that is different from the methodology applied to the marginal characters.

After Don Mateo and Capellán, the third oligarchic character in *Ascensión Tun* is Doña María Martín. Like the rest of the characters, she is from the Yucatan Peninsula. Doña María, the 'administradora', carries out the practical work around the home in order to keep it functioning, creates the new assignments for the interns and ensures that they have completed them. Doña María is noteworthy because she acts as an intermediary between Don Mateo and the rest of the interns of the home who, with the exception of Ascensión Tun, appear to have no direct contact with the director. Doña María, understandably given her position, belongs to the hegemonic group. She is often depicted as solving the problems that arose in the house. This is evident in her inner monologues:

[Don Mateo] Es un hombre extraño; dicen que abandonó a su mujer. Algo se traen entre manos Consuelo y Ascensión, a mí no me engañan, son cómplices de alguna maldad. No sé que vamos a hacer con Juan Bautista; no se me escapa don Mateo, le voy a pedir que lo mande al hospital. Quién iba a decir que una de las "visitas" venía expresamente a robarse el tabaco y la pita. No sé qué anda por el aire de esta casa desde el día de la inundación que ha vuelto la vida aquí una interminable espera, ¿pero de qué por Dios? (Molina 1993a, 80)

The nervousness and constant worry for the affairs of the Casa are well-documented in Doña María's thoughts as well as her actions. Even though this character is described as

someone who suffers from loneliness, Doña María is intimately viewed by the reader thanks to the narrator's ability to penetrate her inner person.

The three individuals analyzed so far, Don Mateo, Capellán, and Doña María, are portrayed as well-rounded characters. Their everyday activities are carefully depicted. We are encouraged to sympathize with them. This is made possible because we are able to penetrate the minds of these individuals and see their personal thoughts and motivations as well as observe their actions. This familiarity makes each of these three characters appear more realistic.

The other three protagonists now to be considered are what might be called the three principal subalterns in this novel, Juan Bautista, Ascensión Tun, and Consuelo. Those three characters are lowly in terms of the social rank they possess and this is echoed by their 'insignificance' and, at times, invisibility. Of the three subalterns portrayed in *Ascensión Tun* the one who is portrayed in the sketchiest way is Juan Bautista. Juan Bautista Puc is an elderly Mayan Indian described as being a shaman, or in other words: '[...] brujo, curandero, herborista [...]' (Molina 1993a, 131). This character is said to have fought on the Mayan side in the several wars that were waged between the Mayans and the European and mestizo settlers in the Yucatan Peninsula and is taken into the Casa de Beneficencia due to his advanced age. There, Juan Bautista is more of a shadow than anything else. The only person who appears to notice the old man is Ascensión Tun (except for the brief moments when one of the non-subalterns would think to have him sent to a hospital), who shortly after his arrival finds him and later adopts him as his grandfather and mentor. Silvia Molina has pointed out that this mentor

role is important to his existence in the novel as well as his symbolizing the heritage of the oral transmission of knowledge by the subaltern:

N.G.: Hay varios personajes que están en esa Casa de Beneficiencia, y uno, Juan Bautista, es un indígena. Una persona así obviamente está un poco lejos de su nivel social, ¿cómo lo hace para crear a una persona así?

S. M.: Él es un indígena, él es un indígena maya. De hecho, el personaje es un Shamán, ¿no? Es un curandero. Los curanderos todavía hoy en la península de Yucatán, los curanderos de origen indígena - además de que por supuesto manejan su lengua - ¿no? hacen todos estos que son muy sincréticos, juntan las dos religiones: la religión católica con la religión prehispánica y es muy mágica. Toda su curación, toda su medicina, digamos es una medicina mágica. La gente los va a ver antes de la siembra para que bendigan la cosecha y los acontecimientos principales de la gente. Y aparentemente no tengo nada que ver con eso, pero sí tengo mucho que ver con eso porque mi familia es de allí. Y como mi familia, por parte de mi padre mi familia es campechana. Entonces yo estuve muy cerca de ese mundo. El mundo del campo. Del mundo de las creencias en los seres míticos ¿no? Por un lado. Luego, por otro lado, pues yo estudié antropología. Yo, mi primera carrera es antropología. Y tú sabes, uno estudia todas estas cosas allí. Lo que yo quería simbolizar con Juan Bautista es cómo todas estas creencias han pasado por tradición oral.

Cuando él está en la Casa de Beneficiencia, para él no tiene sentido estar allí. No entiende qué está haciendo allí, hasta que entra Ascensión y se da cuenta de que su misión en la vida es pasarle su conocimiento al niño.

(ISM)

So, as the above passage has underlined, according to Silvia Molina, Juan Bautista has two main functions in the novel that are intertwined: to teach Ascensión Tun the knowledge he needs, and to symbolize the oral transmission of knowledge employed by the subaltern classes. Molina's quote also brings the present analysis back towards the beginning of this discussion on *Ascensión Tun* in which it was proposed by Ángel Rama that, if non-subaltern authors could incorporate subaltern discourse (i.e. the orality of regional or subcultures) then this would effectively allow the subaltern to speak. Whilst it can be inferred from the quote above that the author does feel that both her education in Anthropology and the fact that she lived near the rural regions in Southern Mexico allow her to write on this subject with a certain authority, Molina has made no clear reference to date about her actually being in direct contact with a shaman (or someone in a similar position) from whom she could have collected an oral account. It is unclear at this point if this text has actually been able to incorporate subaltern accounts of the type Rama required.

However, in fulfilling their role during the course of the novel, Ascensión Tun and his tutor Juan Bautista grow close, even to the point where Ascensión Tun has linked his sole purpose in life to this elderly shaman. This is demonstrated most clearly when

Juan Bautista dies towards the end of the novel and at the scene where Ascensión is contemplating his death:

Algo fundamental sucedía dentro de él: percibió que en aquella casona ya no había ninguna presencia que lo ligara a la vida. No oiría jamás la voz de Juan Bautista, aquella voz solemne y tierna que había comenzado a relatarle la historia de su gente. La desaparición de Juan Bautista lo venía a dejar sin respuesta para el resto de su existencia. (Molina 1993a, 101)

The boy's reaction to Juan Bautista's death reminds the reader of Eugenia's suicidal tendencies noted earlier on in the chapter when we examined 'Mentira piadosa'. With the sense of loss and isolation building with each tragedy that strikes, this young character's death appears as a solution to a meaningless existence. In both cases these are drastic propositions as possible considerations for escaping marginalization. Whereas the death of Ascensión Tun's adoptive grandfather was of monumental importance in the young boy's life, it is strikingly insignificant to the others in the Casa de Beneficencia. Just minutes after his death the director, Don Mateo, has forgotten about it and jokes with the other people in the home: '- Vete a quitar esa ropa, Antonio – dijo el director riendo. Había olvidado la lamentable escena del dormitorio' (Molina 1993, 100). One of the other interns even complains because the old man had been put on his bed while receiving his last rites: 'Eres un desgraciado, Antonio. Con el trabajo que me costó conseguir la cama para que pusieras a ese indio allí' (Molina 1993, 100). However, the majority of the people simply show how little he mattered to them by never mentioning

him again: 'Al día siguiente, Antonio guardó en la bodega la silla de bejuco que le había acondicionado a Juan Bautista. Nadie volvió a nombrar al anciano' (Molina 1993, 103).

This helps the reader to appreciate the way in which the subaltern is visualized within this novel. At best, he is of little importance; at worst, he is a problem to be eliminated.

It would be easy to argue that, unlike the other two narratives studied in this chapter, Juan Bautista's existence in this novel depends on his relationship with Ascensión Tun. The first time this character appears in the narrative occurs when the boy notices him - he is, indeed, the only youth to pay him any regular attention. It is the principal subaltern protagonist's interest that leads to a sense of a more in-depth development of his character. Another difference that creates a stark contrast between Juan Bautista and, for example Don Mateo, is that the reader is not privy to the former's thoughts. That is to say, the reader is not encouraged to empathize with the Indian character. The reader is only able to observe what Juan Bautista does and says while he is with Ascensión. There is a possible explanation for this contrast between the different individuals. Whereas the director of the institution was based on a real individual whom Silvia Molina knew personally, Juan Bautista could only have been based on her experience while she studied anthropology and the time she spent in Campeche. This could account for the flatter effect created by Juan Bautista's character.

Ascensión is the most unique of the three subaltern figures in Ascensión Tun. The boy who was orphaned due to a hurricane that passed through the city - Campeche, arrived at the Casa de Beneficencia at the age of eleven and had only lived in the Casa for about one year before his tragic death. Given that this novel is named after him, it is not surprising that Ascensión is the central character of the novel. Despite his subaltern

status, this young boy plays a pivotal role in the lives of all the main characters of *Ascensión Tun*. At first glance, it appears that Ascensión transcends some of his subalternity because he is actively involved with the hegemonic groups who run the Casa. Nonetheless, the reader soon discovers that the director, far from wanting to give the young boy an education as the state law demanded for the orphans,¹⁴ wants to sell him as a servant; a double standard for the Mayans is thereby shown to be operating in the Mexican society of the time (Molina 1993a, 94). Molina uses italic lettering to ensure that the reader does not miss the hidden intention of this act: ‘Hoy, 26 de octubre de 1890, vendrá una comisión del Ayuntamiento a llevarse a Asensión Tun. Lo han *acomodado* en el *seno* de una familia henequera’ (Molina 1993a, 124). This special wording conveys the impression that Ascensión Tun will be at the mercy of, rather than adopted by, the family that owned an agave plantation and had so ‘generously’ offered to accommodate the young boy.

One way in which Ascensión Tun is different from the hegemonic characters portrayed in the novel is that he too is portrayed almost solely in external terms. Thus the narrator does not appear to have access to this particular character’s thoughts. As noted above, some characters’ thoughts are narrated, others are not. This lack of uniformity is striking when we recall the quote in which Silvia Molina explains that the character Ascensión Tun was based – at least in part – on her own life experiences. Given this, it would seem almost anomalous that this character should be portrayed exclusively from an external point of view. It may be this external view is due to Tun’s source in a written archive, but it is surely noteworthy that all the subaltern figures in the novel – even the important ones like Tun – are denied the privilege of an inner mind. The impression

thereby given to the reader is that the subaltern figures are deliberately ostracized by the narrative consciousness within the novel. We ‘hear’ the thoughts of the hegemonic characters, but we simply ‘see’ the bodies of the subaltern.

Lastly, one of the most intriguing portrayals of the subaltern concerns that of the character Consuelo. This character, whose real name is María Victoria de los Consuelos Peón, is described as having been born in Tekax, Campeche, and came to suffer from dementia as a result of being a victim of the Guerra de Castas. Unlike Juan Bautista whose presence appears faint and shadow-like, or Ascensión Tun who was easily tolerated by the leaders of the house for the most part, Consuelo and her dementia are a constant point of conflict and trial during the whole of the novel. The problems that her fits of her mental illness cause are often commented on by the director and doña María and frequently require that they make personal sacrifices to maintain the peace in the Casa due to the instability Consuelo’s insanity provokes. Much like the institution for mentally handicapped children in ‘Mentira piadosa’ Consuelo appears to captivate the non-subaltern characters’ attention because she represents a type of marginalization that respects nobody. Disability is not class-specific. Indeed, Consuelo’s only friend in the governmental institution appears to be Ascensión though it is never quite clear what his exact interest in her is. The relationship between these two characters seems to have been initiated and maintained more by Consuelo than by the child. However, her uniqueness lies in another direction.

One of the elements that makes Consuelo distinct from the other subalterns represented in this novel is that she has not always belonged to the dispossessed class. Unlike Juan Bautista Puc and Ascensión Tun who have always been a part of the

marginal indigenous class, this character comes from the upper échelons of Campeche society and she spent a good part of her youth as a normal, sane member of that class. She is described in the novel as having a vast and precise recollection of that part of her life. Interestingly enough, in the novel, much like her personal history, Consuelo's awareness of her identity is schizoid, that is, there are moments when she appears to know herself, others when the opposite is the case. When she is her 'normal' everyday self (a woman who suffers from insanity) Consuelo is portrayed very much like Ascensión Tun and Juan Bautista. She is depicted from the outside; her character is quite flat, the reader is able to observe her activities but is left guessing as to what she is thinking. However, her non-subaltern past is depicted quite differently. During her fits of dementia it is almost as if, magically, a barrier is lifted and the narrator is able to see into Consuelo's mind and observe what is occurring in the same way that s/he is able to do with Doña María, Capellán, and Don Mateo. Suddenly, when the character is provided a new non-subaltern dimension, the reader is immediately granted access to the inner workings of her mind.

Molina clearly feels more 'at home' when describing the thoughts and actions of her oligarchic characters; one might speculate that this is a world which is close to the author's personal experience, and which she would have found easier to portray than the world of the subaltern. In any case, the ideology of this narrative appears to be directly linked to the bourgeoisie rather than to the subaltern. It could be argued that this novel adopts a stance in which it embraces the middle and upper classes, and while it does indeed make an effort to represent the marginal classes it is not able to penetrate their world in a real sense. It is difficult to be precise as to the justification for this situation,

but the most likely explanation is that these characters are presented negatively because they are outside of the author's empirical world, and also because the novel is irredeemably bourgeois. None the less, without the author's rationale being available to us, it is practically impossible to offer more than speculation as to the causes behind the portrayal of the subaltern in Molina's narratives. However, the important element to underline is that various characters are treated distinctly and this difference can clearly be seen in the way in which the subaltern is represented more superficially than the non-subaltern characters.

Given her 'hybrid' character, -- she fuses subaltern and non-subaltern characteristics -- Consuelo's presence in the novel raises interesting questions. Should one judge her on her past as a member of an important family in the Campeche region? Or is it more appropriate to judge her present condition as a lunatic who has been forgotten by her family and left to be cared for by the state? Just as this woman's life has been separated into two parts, so the narrative has taken two approaches to the representation of this character. This division helps the reader to conclude that the respective treatments the subaltern and the non-subaltern receive are not products of chance but pertain to real limitations presented by the text itself.

A common element to which all three of the subaltern characters are subject is the consensus within the hegemonic group in the Casa de Beneficencia who, one way or another, desire to eliminate them from the Casa. For each of the subaltern characters distinct plans have been concocted in order to achieve this. Juan Bautista is to be put in a hospital on a permanent basis due to his health problems. Ascensión Tun is to be disposed of by finding him a place in a 'respectable home' in the community because he

is young and needs an education. Finally, Consuelo is going to be interned in a Mental Institution because of her dementia. If the reader considers the Casa to be a microcosm of Mexican Society in the State of Campeche, then the novel emerges as a severe critique of hegemonic ideology in Mexico, and in particular its oppression of subalternity. One of the best justifications for studying literature written about the subaltern by members of the bourgeoisie is that the reader is able to observe some of the ways in which hegemonic discourse effectively satirizes members of the bourgeoisie, and effects a biting social critique.

As mentioned towards the outset, and throughout this chapter, one of the specific ways in which Molina's literary work categorizes the subaltern figure is through its inability to 'exit' subalternity. One of the ways in which this fatalistic view can be observed and analyzed in *Ascensión Tun* is through an analysis of the names of the subaltern protagonists, the symbolism connected to them, and the images they create (or fail to create) within the narrative. Each one of these three characters, Juan Bautista, Ascensión Tun, and Consuelo can be compared to important characters in the New Testament: John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost respectfully. However, even though their names allude to these specific historical figures, Molina's literary creations are not able to fulfill the same historical roles that Christianity has traditionally assigned them. This work's specific portrayal of the subaltern figures discussed in *Ascensión Tun* helps to foment the Spivakian idea of subalternity as being 'irretrievable'. As we shall see, this novel even goes so far as to suggest the notion that the subaltern is even beyond Christianity's reach.

Juan Bautista, as his name clearly suggests, could be viewed as symbolic of John the Baptist. In Molina's novel this old man is seen as a forerunner, and a prophet whose mission is to prepare Ascensión Tun for the future. This previously cited quotation once again aids in demonstrating the link between these two characters: 'Cuando él está en la Casa de Beneficiencia, para él no tiene sentido estar allí. No entiende qué está haciendo allí, hasta que entra Ascensión y se da cuenta de que su misión en la vida es pasarle su conocimiento al niño' (ISM). As Silvia Molina notes, once the old man does realize this, which occurs when these two characters meet for the first time, Juan Bautista begins attempting to establish a path for Ascensión's future work. One of the significant ways in which this character attempts to fulfill his 'mission' as a prophet is through his own prophecies with regard to the young boy's future (Molina 1993a, 87). One of these foretells Ascensión's liberation from the Casa de Beneficiencia and his future as a leader who will bring justice to everyone: 'Pronto voy a salir, lo dicen los granos de maíz, me estoy preparando. [...] En Chan Santa Cruz aprenderé muchas cosas, allá habrá quien me instruya para ser jefe. El tata me echó los granos de maíz y eso dicen. Cuando yo sea jefe no habrá niños encerrados y las leyes serán iguales para todos' (Molina 1993a, 72). Here it is clear that Ascensión believes in Juan Bautista's divine predictions. This character's prophetic messages appear to give the young boy direction and purpose, as well as other significant powers, such as the interpretation of dreams (Molina 1993a, 93). However, notwithstanding all that this character does for Ascensión, at his death these transcendent expectations are shown to have been built on false hope: 'La desaparición de Juan Bautista lo venía a dejar respuesta para el resto de su existencia' (Molina 1993a 101). Unlike the biblical Christ, this young protagonist apparently stops believing in past

prophecies, loses his bearing with relation to his future, and solely centers on his own escape from the institution that detains him physically – la Casa de Beneficencia. So, far from the John the Baptist found in Christianity, it seems that the death of Juan Bautista in *Ascensión Tun* - though it is not inferred that he died prematurely – fails to complete his mission thus leaving the future for Ascensión in disarray.

Consuelo, whose name alludes to the Holy Ghost (the comforter), assumes a role that could be described as the complete opposite of what her name would indicate. Her presence in this novel is – ironically enough - one that causes chaos rather than solace. A victim of a deranged mind, she suffers from fits: ‘No había nada qué hacer. Consuelo sudaba la agonía soñando con aquel hombre [que le provocó su locura]’ (Molina 1993a, 39). She is not the only victim of her dementia. Others complain of her as well, particularly María (Molina 1993a, 26), and Consuelo is of great concern for many members of staff and others interned in this house, one of whom predicts the future tragedy: ‘Consuelo no debería estar aquí. Un día de éstos va a matar a alguien’ (Molina 1993a, 51-52). That is precisely what occurs. Instead of testifying of the divine as her biblical counterpart would, Consuelo creates confusion and ultimately the death of Ascensión. One particular occasion demonstrates how, after he had been telling her about what he would do in the future, Consuelo’s silence causes the younger protagonist to doubt his own mission in life: ‘Sé que no me quieres y que no me vas a decir nada. Ascensión enmudeció, le entraron dudas [acerca de su futuro]. No le sacaría ninguna palabra a Consuelo’ (Molina 1993a, 72). So, as detailed above, this particular character does not fulfill a mission as a comforter – she creates chaos; instead of bearing witness to Ascensión’s foretold work, she ultimately truncates it.

There are several ways in which Ascensión Tun, arguably the most important subaltern figure in the narrative in question, can be viewed as a Christ figure. As mentioned earlier, he is proclaimed by Juan Bautista (John the Baptist) to be a liberator and a reformer (Molina 1993a, 72). He also confirms his belief in this prophecy - at least while his mentor was alive (Molina 1993a, 50) - and he begins his mission/revolution after coming into contact with Juan Bautista (Molina 1993a, 93). Those who govern him (the director of the house and other government officials) conspire against him to have him sold into slavery as a way of putting an end to his revolutions and to the constant reminders of social injustices that are committed. Don Mateo confesses: 'Me recordaron que los huérfanos se han considerado propiedad del Estado, que si era tanto lo que me revolucionaba la Casa podría venderlo como sirviente' (Molina 1993a, 94). This is an image that alludes to how Christ, a revolutionary figure, was also conspired against in order to put an end to His suggested and actual reforms.

Ascensión Tun is thus a figure who symbolizes a messianic character, but at the same time falls short of fulfilling his mission and is incapable of bringing about promised change. His name clearly suggests this. Ascensión, his first name, alludes to the ascension of Christ into heaven upon successfully completing his mission in Jerusalem (Acts 2). Nonetheless, the young protagonist's surname, Tun, means stone. The two contrasting images that make up this personage's name are significant. The first name makes an appeal to the divinity, so to speak, of this character by relating him to the resurrected Christ whereas the other name clearly refers to the ground, a common, even lowly, part of the concrete world. Both Heaven and Earth are contrasted in Molina's subaltern protagonist. In the end though, it is the Earth that is victorious in this narrative.

Tun is unable to complete his mission when killed by Consuelo. Nevertheless, this should be of no surprise to the reader. The meaning of Ascensión's last name at the outset of the novel (Molina 1993a, 23) is an early foreshadowing of this character's inability to ascend into heaven and thereby fulfill his mission. So it seems that from the outlook the dye is cast and the subaltern is locked into failure. This foreshadowing is once again reiterated at the death of Juan Bautista (Molina 1993a, 102), pointing to the impending failure; the demise of the man who gave Ascensión guidance and direction is really the beginning of the end.

This chapter argues that, far from a slight on Christianity, *Ascensión Tun* employs the symbolism previously discussed in order boldly to underline the inability of the subaltern to succeed in exiting subalternity. Irrespective of Molina's personal religious creed, it is significant to note that the narrative was created and published in Mexico, a country that is overwhelmingly Catholic/Christian.¹⁵ This specific context helps to make the failure of these characters to complete the explicit missions that Christianity has associated with their individual names much more powerful and poignant. In this novel, it would seem that not even the divine is able to succeed in freeing the subaltern figures, as they appear to be tragically destined to defeat. In particular, the image of the messianic motif that is destined to failure is indeed a strong critique that conveys the Spivakian idea that the subaltern characters are 'irretrievable' because they are portrayed as being out of the reach even of Christianity. The result of this use of these particular emblems is explained by the investigator who 'discovered' the manuscript containing the main account delivered to the reader: '[...] comprobé la historia de Ascensión. No era la que me relató la hija de Josefa; es un [sic] historia más sobrecogedora y triste' (Molina 1993a,

12). Thus, the introduction clearly alludes to the plight of the subaltern, and this narrative's religious symbolism emphasizes this point.

One last question to be raised concerns the interplay of fictiveness and reality in the novel. Intriguingly, there are occasions in *Ascensión Tun* when the characters' dialogue looks as though the author has placed words in their mouths which appear to be out of place and are transparently part of a more personal agenda. The boy Ascensión Tun gives one of the clearest examples of this. Capellán narrates the incident:

Ya nada más quiero contarte una cosa que sucedió ayer: Don Mateo estaba en su oficina y dice que lo interrumpió Ascensión para decirle que tenía varios meses en esta Casa, suficientes para estar sin ir a la escuela, que él, don Mateo, le había prometido. Don Mateo no encontró cómo explicarle... Según cuenta el director, Ascensión le dijo que quería estudiar leyes “para cambiarlas porque no son justas, porque no voy a la escuela, porque me tienen encerrado aquí, porque el indio no sale de pobre toda su vida”.

(Molina 1993a, 50)

These words seem too complex as well as too politically charged to be typical of a youth like Tun. In this situation the narrator, who has momentarily given Ascensión almost a young Benito-Juárez-like character, appears to be taking advantage of this personage in order to make a wide-ranging, political statement about the ways in which Mexican Indians have systematically been denied access to education by the Mexican State.

Similar in this to the other two narratives analyzed in this chapter, *Ascensión Tun*, while demonstrating signs of heightened sensitivity to the world of the subaltern, clearly proclaims itself as a product of the bourgeoisie. While the non-subalterns are seen from inside, as it were, the subalterns are viewed externally. It might be argued that the final effect of the novel is a positive one since it does not try to be something it is not. Unlike a novel such as Azuela's *Los de abajo*, for example, it does not assert its own ability to 'express' and 'understand' the subaltern.¹⁶

Finally in answer to the question - Does the subaltern speak in *Ascension Tun*? - our answer must be no, at least not clearly so. However, as we have seen, much can be learned from the treatment of the subaltern by Silvia Molina, particularly in her efforts to represent the subaltern in her novel and the ways in which the academic institutions show their influence on fictions written about the marginal classes. While the subaltern is not allowed to speak in a purist sense, nevertheless, novels of this caliber can provide insight about how hegemony interacts with subalternity, and can constitute a place for greater social sensitivity.

Having looked at these three narratives Molina has written on the subaltern, different conclusions can be drawn. The majority of protagonists in these narratives are either from the upper échelons of society (and therefore do not mix with others) or subalterns whose social position does not appear to change. The élite characters are portrayed as only really being attracted to the subalterns who arouse their curiosity in some special way. This undoes any claim of solidarity between the two sectors of society and converts the marginal into something of a museum piece that has been put on display for some unique quality(s) that the narrator finds captivating.

‘Mentira piadosa’, *El amor que me juraste*, and *Ascensión Tun* present several different types of subalternity: men, women and children from different walks of life as well as distinct areas of Mexico. If these three narratives do affirm one point it is that marginality affects varied sectors of Mexican society. The personages depicted in these narratives do not live complacently in a happy alternative world located somewhere on the margins of Mexican society. Though external in its nature, the picture painted by the narrator(s) of the subaltern is often quite bleak. One of the elements that helps to contribute to this image is the circularity of the narrative. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter since the narrator begins her story from some specific point in a present time frame and looks back on the past, so to speak, this presents the image that the subaltern is locked into a past that has not changed.

At the beginning of this chapter Silvia Molina was quoted as having described herself as someone who belongs to the bourgeoisie. This statement might lead some to believe that what she has written could not have anything to do with the subaltern, but in fact her writings demonstrate various essential points about members of the bourgeoisie who attempt to write on the subaltern. As an anthropologist she has approached the subaltern in a rather different manner when compared to members of other élite classes who presume to represent the subaltern without any real prior knowledge of them. Molina’s writings demonstrate more limits than perhaps the traditional author does who presumes to represent the subaltern fully. The subalterns in Molina’s novels are incomplete, ghostly, often misunderstood, and, in general, possess an identity that is sketchy and never fully revealed to the reader. These three narratives demonstrate a writer who, at least academically, has come into contact with the subaltern and tends to

represent them in a way that shows less depth than other writers. Furthermore, as an author, Molina includes – knowingly or not – trends and ideas with respect to the marginal classes that are in accordance with the established academic knowledge on the subaltern. It is true that the subaltern does not speak in Molina's novels; nevertheless, the author's intention concerning them is much less pretentious than others who claim to speak on the subaltern's behalf in their narratives.

¹ In the same interview Molina subsequently explained why she began going to her first literary workshop. N.G.: Y ese taller de Elena Poniatowska y Hugo Hiriart ¿cómo era? Se reunían una vez por semana... ¿cómo era?

S.M.: Cuando yo fui porque después el taller creo que todavía existe y muchas señoras que iban en esa época siguen llegando al taller. En esa época se reunían todos los jueves, y yo fui al taller porque buscaba a José Agustín que él daba clases en el taller ¿no? Lo conocí entonces porque cuando yo llegué se acababa de ir y se reunían todos los jueves.

² In this section of the interview Molina explains some of Elena Poniatowska's influence on her as a writer. N.G.: ¿Y Ud. la [Elena Poniatowska] consideraría como una maestra en su...?

S.M.: Yo creo que sí fíjate. Me enseñó bastante cuando yo comencé a escribir. No sabía que el trabajo de la literatura era la limpieza. Con ella aprendí lo que era la corrección. Pero quien realmente me formó como escritora fue Hugo Hiriart.

S.M.: Él es una persona muy erudita, muy culta, muy seria, muy apasionada para la literatura, y un gran observador, es un filósofo realmente, ¿no? Él siempre me hacía reflexionar sobre la escritura, yo me acuerdo que aprendí, me decía mira, cuando por ejemplo tu ponías: Voy a la calle. ¿no? y me decía eso es muy vulgar, entonces me abría una rayita y me decía: ¿Por qué verbos puedes sustituir voy? y me enseñó a reflexionar en torno a la literatura y escritura más que Elena. Elena así me enseñó el oficio de la corrección al principio digamos y me enseñó a escarbar un poco en el ser humano ¿no? pero realmente el oficio, el oficio, el oficio, lo aprendí con Hugo. (Nathanial Gardner, 'Interview with Silvia Molina', 8 November, 2001)

³ Some examples of this class of studies are as follows: R. Teichmann (1990) studies the theme of identity with relation to history in three of Silvia Molina's novels. K. García (1993) considers the treatment of history with relation to the fictionality of Molina's novel *La familia que vino del norte*. M. Medina (1996) considers the treatment of the female protagonist as a subject of the families history in *La familia que vino del norte*. M. Medina (1997) claims in his article that *Ascensión Tun* is a historical novel that effectively helps to rewrite history. L. Underwood (1997-1998) emphasizes Molina's use of real Mexican history in the creation of *Ascensión Tun*. E. Hind (2001) argues that *El amor que me juraste* addresses omissions in the 1994 'official history' textbooks produced by Carlos Salinas' government administration.

⁴ The following are examples of this kind of analysis: M. Bolívar (1996) reviews the role and treatment of the female protagonist Consuelo in *Ascensión Tun*. K. Sugg. (1999) analyzes the father-daughter relationships and the treatment of family in Molina's novel *La familia que vino del norte*. N. Gardner (2003c) focuses on the projection of the subaltern characters in *Ascensión Tun*.

⁵ The following are representatives of those various themes: M. Bolívar (1989) attempts to situate Molina's novel *Ascensión Tun* in the Mexican literary canon by comparing it to *Los recuerdos del porvenir* by Elena Garro and *Oficio de tinieblas* by Roario Castellanos; this article sacrifices analysis for plot summary. T. Rojas (1995) reviews the treatment of incest in Silvia Molina's drama *Circuito cerrado*. G. Beerm and M. Orozco-Guzman (1999) review Molina's work and analyze her place as a contemporary female author in the contemporary Mexican literary canon.

⁶ The following articles were inaccessible at the time this thesis was written: 'Historia, mujer y traición en *La familia que vino del norte*' (Tafoya 1996, 67-71), and 'Metaficción e historias en *La familia que vino*

del norte de Silvia Molina' (von Son 2002, 46-54), 'La musa masculina en las novelas de Silvia Molina' (Hind 2003, 57-72).

⁷ This thesis will use these terms in the sense that Canclini employs them in *Hybrid Cultures* (1995). Canclini described hybridization as something which includes: 'diverse intercultural mixes not only the radical ones to which *mestizaje* tends to be limited – and because it permits the inclusion of the modern forms of hybridization better than does "syncretism", a term that almost always refers to religious fusions or traditional symbolic movements' (Canclini 1995, 11).

⁸ Unlike the rest of Molina's fiction to date that deals with the subaltern, the action in this short story takes place entirely in the Mexican Capital, the other two narratives studied in this chapter tend to be more focused on the southern Mexican state of Campeche – a common setting for much of Molina's writings. Though it should be pointed out that in *El amor que me juraste* there is also action that takes place in the capital and in other locations.

⁹ The following is a small selection from an interview between Nathaniel Gardner and Silvia. I asked her how she felt it was possible for her to create the subaltern characters in *Ascensión Tun* in a credible and authentic manner. What follows is her answer:

N.G.: Yo me preguntaba: ¿Cómo le hacía para crear un personaje así? Estando tan lejos de su realidad personal. Pero ahora, Ud. me ha dicho que eso no es el caso.

S.M.: No, no. Y si no hubiera estado cerca concretamente en el campo de Campeche. De todas maneras estamos cerca en México, en todas partes. Nosotros provenimos de esa cultura. La tenemos a flor de piel en todas partes. Tú vas al mercado en la Ciudad de México. A cualquiera de los grandes mercados, y siempre hay un puesto, si tú te fijas, de hierbas: de hierbas tradicionales de medicina tradicional. Y siempre está esa persona allí que hace las dos funciones. No solamente es la cura física de las hierbas, sino siempre hacen limpias. ¿no? Toda esta magia que nosotros tenemos acá es por provenir de una cultura mestiza.

N.G: Entonces, ¿en parte es por herencia y porque en México hay mucho contacto entre diferentes clases sociales y gente de diferentes círculos?

S.M.: Sí. Sí. De hecho tú ves, mucha gente no cree en eso ¿no? Yo en la medicina tradicional por supuesto que sí creo y mucha gente, por ejemplo de la burguesía. Tiene como una cosa muy particular: ir a consultar a todos estos tipos adivinos, entre comillas, digamos ¿no? (ISM)

¹⁰ For the definition of *telenovela* as used in this chapter, see footnote number fifteen in chapter three.

¹¹ At present, as mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the two most common approaches employed when studying Molina's novels focus on history and the role of the female characters in Molina's novels. For more specific examples and references please refer to endnotes three, four, and five of this chapter.

¹² This information was provided from a personal letter from Silvia Molina to Nathaniel Gardner, 10 October, 2001.

¹³ This information originates from a personal letter from Silvia Molina to Nathaniel Gardner dated 10 October, 2001.

¹⁴ In this novel the law stipulated the following: 'Artículo octavo: Todo huerfano, de cualquier edad y condición será recibido en esta Casa y puesto en su departamento respectivo, donde trabajará hasta que el Ayuntamiento lo extraiga, para darle oficio y educación a los varones y acomodo en casa honrada a las mujeres' (Molina 1993, 20).

¹⁵ More precise data supporting this statement is presented in chapter four, p. 218.

¹⁶ One good example of a classic Mexican novel that is not very realistic in its portrayal of the subaltern is *Los de abajo*. Though this chapter does not want to detract from the artistic merit of this specific novel, it is, in many ways, quite far from the reality of the subaltern. Azuela published an essay that describes the construction of his most famous novel while confirming the asseveration above: 'Por lo demás, la mayor parte de los sucesos referidos en la novela no fueron presenciados por mí, sino contruidos o reconstruidos con retazos de visiones de gentes y acontecimientos. Los que la llaman relato no saben de la misa la media, si con ese título intentan decir que escribí como el que hace crónica o reportazgo. [...] El novelista seguramente toma los elementos para sus construcciones del mundo que lo rodea o de los libros. Pero tal obra no se limita a la acumulación y ordenación de los materiales inertes, sino a la organización de un cuerpo nuevo y dotado de vida propia, de una obra de creación. De tal suerte, que los mejores personajes de una novela serán aquellos que más lejos estén del modelo. Recuerdo que, en correspondencia con el licenciado don José López Portillo y Rojas, después de mi regreso de los Estados Unidos, a propósito de *Los de abajo* escribí estas líneas: "Si yo me hubiera encontrado entre los revolucionarios un tipo de la talla

de Demetrio Macías, lo habría seguido hasta la muerte''' (Azuela 1988, 283-84). This statement clearly confirms the notion of overt invention of literary characters in the creation of this novel, and not the reconstruction of a verifiable reality.

Chapter Five: Rosa Nissán

The final author to be examined in this thesis, Rosa Nissán, was born in Mexico City in 1939. The daughter of Jewish immigrants (her mother was from Turkey and her father Jerusalem) she is the oldest of six children. Rosita, as she is known by her friends, grew up in a Jewish neighborhood, attended Jewish schools, and spent the first three decades of her life in a small Semitic world unfamiliar to the majority of the inhabitants of the Mexican capital. Nissán finished a technical degree in Journalism at *La Universidad Feminina* - though she did not practice this profession until much later in life – she married young (aged eighteen), and by her early thirties was the mother of four children. Her life would have been devoted exclusively to suburban motherhood had she not met the individuals who would help her become a novelist. As noted in an earlier chapter, Rosa began to attend Elena Poniatowska's literary workshop, 'El grupo', which led to the publication of her first novels and the subsequent development of her literary career.

Rosa Nissán has affirmed on several occasions that *Novia que te vea* (1992) and *Hisho que te nazca* (1996) are a combination of autobiography and fiction. Referring to both novels, she said: 'Hay un 70 por ciento de autobiografía. Pero son personajes ficticios que hablan con mi voz' (Mateos 1996). In addition to publishing these first two novels and numerous newspaper articles, Nissán has also published a book of chronicles, *Las tierras prometidas: crónicas de un viaje a Israel* (1997), and two collections of short stories: *No sólo para dormir es la noche* (1999) and *Los viajes de mi cuerpo* (2002). In 2002 the English translations of *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* (brought

together under one title as *Like a Bride and Like a Mother*) were published by the University of New Mexico Press.

Nissán's work has received various critiques during the last decade. In Mexico, some reviews have been negative. Eduardo Mejía's article argued that while *Novia que te vea* has been carefully edited grammatically, it contained several chronological errors along with many inconsistencies and left many narrative strands open-ended (Mejía 1993, 13). Arguing that Nissán's work has no original merit, Mejía was also keen to note that the author in question: '[...] cuenta lo mismo que otros libros, de la glorificación de la infancia (que hicieron Proust, Garibay y muchos otros) [...]' (1993, 13).¹ It is true that selected pieces of Rosa Nissán's work do appear to have some loose ends. For example, Mejía brings to light an episode in *Novia que te vea* in which the dentist told Oshinica she had twenty-eight cavities, but surprisingly the narrator never mentions that point again. Nissán does make use of themes found in other novels. But to use this as an argument to prove that Nissán's work is completely devoid of originality is unfair. In contrast to the severity Mejía displayed in his article, one of the earliest reviews of Nissán's first novel – which appeared in the well-known Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* was positive: '*Novia que te vea* es el magnífico libro de Rosa Nissán, que ya se ha destacado antes como fotografía de gran sensibilidad' (Anonymous 1992).² Another critic, Daniel Cazés has touched on one of the novel's most original components that often arouses readers' interest:

Novia que te vea es la primera novela sefardita mexicana. En ella destacan expresiones y vocablos, párrafos enteros, escritos en el castellano que

conservaron y llevaron por su propia vía los expulsados de Sefarad hace 500 años para poblar el mundo otomano. Ese español ya sólo se conserva aquí en las palabras de algunos ancianos muy ancianos, y en la memoria de algunos hijos y nietos de inmigrantes de habla mexicana. (Cazés 1992, 3-4)

University academics have also taken interest in the Sephardic aspects of Nissán's works. Reneé Scott, for example, focuses on the treatment of Judeo-Spanish identity in Mexico and Uruguay in her article published in *Sefarad*, 'La experiencia sefardí en Latinoamérica: Tres novelas de Teresa Porzecanski y Rosa Nissán'. However, this article simply reviews all three novels and emphasizes their Jewish protagonists lead lives very different from the 'typical' youth in Latin America. Another essay that also centers on the linguistic aspects of Nissán's novels is Yael Halevi-Wise's 'Puente entre naciones: Idioma e identidad sefardí en *Novia que te vea* y *Hisho que te nazca* de Rosa Nissán'. Halevi-Wise briefly analyzes the use of the Ladino language in both novels, demonstrating how language is linked to Sephardic cultural identity in each of the two narratives. She also indicates the pressure the older women exert on the younger females in their community by analyzing the phrase 'novia que te vea'. Halevi-Wise observes that the expression 'novia que te vea (yo)' emphasizes the others' desire to witness the wedding rather than the individual's desire to marry. Finally, this article suggests that the combination of both modern Castilian and Judeo-Spanish is a way in which traditional Judaism could be linked with the contemporary Hispanic world. Several literary critics have concentrated on the portrayal of different aspects of Jewish culture in Nissán's

work. One such example is Judith Morganroth Schneider's article, 'Representation of Diasporic Consciousness: Reflections on Genealogy, Geography and Gender in *Las tierras prometidas*', which discusses Jewish and Mexican cultural issues in Nissán's only chronicle [*crónica*] to date (2001, 65-83). Another is Manuel Medina's 'Imagining a Space In Between: Writing the Gap between Jewish and Mexican Identities in Rosa Nissán's Narrative'. Medina studies Nissán's first three publications, arguing that they 'attempt to create a space in-between the two cultures that make up her identity, the Mexican and the Jewish' (Medina 2000, 93) and claims that Mexico, as a country, allows both identities to fuse into one. However, this approach glosses over many of the problems encountered by Jews in Mexico who attempt to integrate into mainstream society. Finally Nathaniel Gardner's article, '*Como te ven, te tratan*' (2003c, 63-78), focuses on subaltern character representation in Nissán's novels by analyzing the 'voice' these figures are given within her texts.³

As this review of the criticism suggests, the personal and autobiographical tone of Nissán's fiction is an element that sets her apart from the other contemporary Jewish Mexican authors. Nissán offers the reader a more down-to-earth view of the modern-day Jewish community in the Mexican capital. In contrast, Nissán's peers, Margo Glantz, Ester Seligson, Angelina Muñoz-Huberman, and Sabina Berman, incorporate Judaism in order to achieve a mystical, mythical, historical, or simply exotic presence in their fiction.⁴ Nissán's approach towards her community and narrative strategy – a first person narrative speaking from within the community itself –, enables the reader to feel as if s/he were being shown an intimate view of one of Mexico's subaltern worlds in a contemporary setting.

Some readers, however, may not even have considered Mexico's Jewish communities to be part of its subaltern population. What follows will attempt to clarify why the Jewish communities could be considered subaltern. In so doing, it becomes appropriate to briefly review the history of Judaism in Mexico. Ever since the early 1500s, Mexico has been a place of refuge for the Jews. However, many of those who came to Mexico in colonial times were already *conversos* and *marranos*, who never really established a Jewish community, but rather, took their place within the larger Mexican society (Stavans 1997, 441). This trend changed during the era in which Porfirio Díaz governed Mexico. The *élite porfirista* modified the existing immigration laws in the early twentieth century with the hope of attracting: 'la inmigración extranjera para la resolución de los problemas económicos y demográficos y "lograr una colonización nutrida y sana en consonancia con la dilatada extensión de nuestro país"' (Seligson 1983, 79). These explicit new laws, created to attract more foreign investment, favored immigrants from Europe, preferably adherents to a capitalistic culture, and one of the groups to respond to those modifications was the Semitic (Seligson 1983, 79). The years that followed, 1911-1950, represented the biggest wave of Jewish immigration to Mexican soil, largely due to the changes mentioned above and to modifications in immigration policy by Mexico's northern neighbor:

Esta inmigración masiva hacia Mexico está íntimamente vinculada con la política migratoria de los Estados Unidos, ya que este país era la meta de la gran mayoría de los judíos europeos, por lo que en la medida en que se

restringió su entrada a los Estados Unidos, la corriente migratoria se orientó hacia Mexico. (Seligson 1983, 107)

This human influx gradually tapered off in the 1950s. This left the total Jewish population (which had previously been in the low hundreds) at approximately 23,900 in 1950. This constituted well under one percent of Mexico's total population at that time: 0.093% (Seligson 1983, 120). Since then, the population has grown to 45,260 in 2000, but in comparison with the rest of the country's population its percentage has decreased, falling to 0.046% of Mexico's total population.⁵

However, belonging to a minority group is not necessarily what makes the Jewish population in Mexico subaltern (Mexico's élite class is also small). What marginalizes this group is its size *and* difference to the norm with regards to religion. In a country in which 'Roman Catholicism is practiced by more than 95% of the population',⁶ and more than 99% profess to be Christian, the values that accompany these belief systems permeate almost every aspect of law, politics, culture and daily life,⁷ leaving those who are not of that faith the option of assimilating or being left on the margins of mainstream society.

Some members of the Mexican Jewish community, however, have been integrated into mainstream culture. A prime example of this kind of figure in the political and literary world is Margo Glantz, who was the cultural attaché for the Mexican Embassy in London in the 1980s. She is a successful literary critic as well as an established writer in Mexico City. Glantz has published fiction and contributed to well-known periodical

publications (like *Vogue*) that are deemed to be very much a part of mainstream Mexican culture.

Most critics, however, consider the Latin American Jewish community as marginal. The Jewish-Chilean author, Marjorie Agosín, for example, observes that: ‘Throughout history, in predominantly Catholic countries, Jews have become the emblematic symbol for the foreigner, the “outsider” who despite being from a family that has resided in his or her country for generations, does not really belong. But neither is he or she really a foreigner’ (Agosín 1999, x).⁸ Another academic who has also noted the subaltern status of modern Jewish Mexican writers is Darrell B. Lockhart:

Their names sound familiar enough [Berman, Glantz, Seligson, Nissán and Muñiz-Huberman] to those acquainted with Mexican literature because they have been widely read – at least in academic circles -, received numerous literary awards, and been translated into English, yet they remain curiously on the margins of what in general terms is called ‘Mexican Literature’. (Lockhart 1997, 160)

However, Lockhart has also pointed out that this subaltern location within the Mexican canon has favored these writers as poststructuralist theory and criticism has increasingly focused on marginal texts: ‘Poststructuralist theory and criticism has played a central role in providing a means by which marginal texts have begun to achieve a position of prominence. [...] In Latin American literature, we see this inversion taking

place as women's, gay and lesbian, black, and Jewish writing move gradually toward the center [...] (Lockhart 1997, 160).⁹

But perhaps one of the strongest arguments that demonstrates the subalternization of at least some of the Jewish-Mexicans comes from Rosa Nissán herself. She has stated that she feels her community to be marginalized and that Jewish writers operate from the margins of Mexican society:

NG: ¿Cree usted que la comunidad judía es una comunidad marginada?

RN: Sí, es una comunidad marginada.

NG: ¿Siente usted que escribe desde los márgenes?

RN: Ahora no escribo desde los márgenes. Antes, con las primeras tres novelas sí. Fue la experiencia de estar en un pequeño grupo y luego mi apertura ¿no? (IRN1)

Though at the time of that interview (Summer 2002) Nissán felt she had overcome much of the marginalization that affected her, the feeling of isolation from the rest of Mexico influenced the way in which she wrote, and the subject matter of her fiction. None the less, she also confirmed in the same interview that, gradually as she was able to 'abrirse al mundo' and leave behind the small Jewish circle of which she had formed a part, her opportunities to publish increased. Later, she claims to have created what she has described as 'her first Mexican novel' – as opposed to a Jewish one.¹⁰

However, during the period of time when Nissán felt she was writing from the margins of Mexican society there was a series of incidents which points to her treatment

as a subaltern. It concerns how she was excluded from the credits of the film version of her novel *Novia que te vea*. Recently this film has attracted the attention of at least one renowned Latin-Americanist who has commented on this in his own critical analysis. In *Mexico City: Contemporary Mexican Literature*, David William Foster described Nissán as: ‘part of a cluster of Mexican Jewish writers and is fortunate to have had her first novel, *Novia que te vea*, made into a film of the same name by Guita Schyfter in 1992 in a full commercial production’ (Foster 2002, 15). Indeed it holds true that the film has created greater awareness with regard to Nissán’s novel and some of the themes found within its pages. However, disagreements between Guita Schyfter, Rosa Nissán, and Schyfter’s husband, Hugo Hiriart¹¹ have caused Rosa Nissán to have serious misgivings with respect to her collaboration in this project. This problem has been largely based on accreditation with respect to the authorship of the script for the film *Novia que te vea*. At about the time of the ‘Ariel’ film awards in Mexico the authorship and origin of the script for this movie came into question on several different occasions with various parties claiming to have originated the script itself. A brief review of several newspaper articles printed from May 1993 to July 1994 will help to clarify the polemic.

The earliest articles published about *Novia que te vea*, all appear to be in agreement with the idea that the script was based on Nissán’s first novel. One of the very initial descriptions of the film described it as: ‘basada en la exitosa novela de Rosa Nissán [...]’ (Gracida, 1993). Shortly before its debut in the Mexican capital the director, Guita Schyfter, described her film in an article which described it as: ‘basada en la novela de Rosa Nissán’ and went on to note that: ‘La intencion de adaptarla [la novela de Nissán] al cine fue presentar una historia divertida y emocionante. Conocí la novela cuyo

tema central es la infancia y adolescencia de una muchacha judía-mexicana y me agradó. Así – agregó [Schyfter] – que entre Rosa Nissán, Hugo Hiriart y yo adaptamos la novela y recreamos un nuevo argumento cinematográfico intentando contar un cuento sobre la niñez y juventud de dos mujeres de nuestra época’ (García López 1994). At this point Schyfter was in agreement that all three authors had created the script for her film.

However, an article published on the same day (6 June, 1994) as the one previously cited, offered a very different account, ‘*Novia que te vea*, la favorita de la noche’ (Anonymous, *Cine mundial*, 1994) which reviewed many of the films nominated for the Ariel awards, made no mention of Nissán’s novel nor of her collaboration in writing the script. The articles that appeared after the presentation of ‘El Ariel’ clarified what had been happening on that night and how those events affected Nissán’s relationship to the film in question.¹²

On 13 June 1994, an article appeared in *Proceso* that praised this new movie and spoke of its origin as well as its feats. The journalist Miguel de la Vega claimed that while this production was based on the Rosa Nissán’s novel, the award for best script (one of six awards made to this film) was given to Guita Schyfter’s husband, Hugo Hiriart. After establishing those facts he quoted Rosa Nissán’s reaction to her exclusion from the event:

Me extraña mucho cómo pudo ser que una persona como Hugo Hiriart, tan estimado, a quien yo consideraba evidentemente un hombre justo, pasara a recoger su Ariel y no dijera: ‘Comparto mi crédito con Rosa Nissán’, si sabe que trabajamos juntos en la elaboración del guión de *Novia que te*

vea dos veces por semana por varios meses hasta casi su terminación. Me parece increíble cómo pudo apropiarse de todos los créditos mi amigo y maestro, al que por tener 20 años de conocer no me aseguré de antemano que me diera el crédito que tanto en la película como en esta noche de gala me correspondía. Me sentí defraudada. (de la Vega 1994a)

As Rosa Nissán began to make her public denouncement of her exclusion from the awards ceremony and the film itself, details with regards to the relationship between the three artists began to emerge. At this point, though Nissán recognized that: '[...] Hugo trabajó el 60 por ciento y yo [Nissán] el 40 [...]' (de la Vega 1994a), there was a difference of opinion as to who was responsible for what and there were insinuations that Nissán was excluded purposely. Hiriart justified his failure to acknowledge Nissán on the basis of her relative lack of experience. He appeared to argue that she was a student who was there to learn, so to speak, not to be a co-author:

El guión de *Novia que te vea* lo hice solo. Rosa sólo quería aprender, pero un día simplemente dejó de ir. Se quejó de que su novela había casi desaparecido. Por las prisas de la producción, tuve que terminarlo solo y ella no supo como acabó. [...] No sé que pretende Rosa; debería estar orgullosa de que su primera novela haya sido filmada. Además, la gente no entiende la sutileza de las cosas, cómo sucedieron y qué pasó realmente. Ahora yo quedo como el gandalla de la película. (de la Vega 1994b)

As part of an answer to Hiriart's rationalizations, and in her own defense Nissán later claimed that when she was given the final copy of the original script: 'corroboró que su nombre [Nissán] también figuraba dentro de los créditos correspondientes' (Salinas 1994). In addition to this she countered Hiriart's claim that Nissán was not included because she simply stopped working with Guita Schyfter and her husband. Nissán's description of the events immediately prior to their professional estrangement painted a different picture: 'Hugo afirma que porque 'simplemente' dejé de ir, pero la verdad es que el último día en el que trabajamos juntos en mi casa, llegó Guita, discutieron y se fueron. No volvieron a llamarme' (Salinas 1994). Moreover, Nissán rebutted the idea that she did not deserve credit because she was attending the scriptwriting meetings as a novice: 'Mi colaboración, sobre todo en la parte en ladino fue definitiva, entonces el aprendizaje se lo di también yo a él' (Nissán 1994). In addition to this point, Nissán also underlined the fact that she had already obtained experience with regard to scriptwriting: 'De hecho, mucho antes de conocer a Guita, estaba tomando un curso de guión cinematográfico con Marcela Fernández Violante, y ya tenía muy adelantada mi adaptación a cine de uno de mis cuentos' (Nissán 1994). Towards the end of her public defense Rosa Nissán made a statement that appeared to describe the subaltern's subordination to the power of the élite: 'Yo represento un caso en el que los grandes personajes abusan de la gente que se está iniciando y no tiene, por lo tanto, camino andado' (Nissán 1994). Some of Nissán's arguments deserve further comment. Firstly, Nissán underscored the power relationships that existed between Hiriart and Schyfter and Nissán. As characters within the art industry that possessed much more time, experience,

connections and influence, Schyfter and Hiriart were able to make the corresponding contracts that enabled the movie to be produced. This placed them in a favorable decision-making position. Nissán appeared to have become dependant upon them due to her lack of experience and personal connections in this field rather than because of and shortcomings with regards to her knowledge. It has already been indicated that she possessed a definitive advantage over them with regard to her linguistic knowledge of Ladino (an important element in the film) and was not inexperienced with regard to scriptwriting. Though instructed in much of the theory, in this instance, Nissán's treatment appeared to be to blame for her lack of experience in the professional world. (One should remember that at this point Nissán had been attending literary workshops for more than ten years, but it had only been approximately two years since she had started publishing and had only one novel to her credit. She was still very much a part of that 'subaltern world' she described earlier in this chapter.) This lack of practical experience appeared to work against her.

However, regardless of her lack of experience with respect to filmmaking, in the articles previously cited, the sense emerges that Nissán was forced into the position of subaltern on a number of occasions. Nissán's situation is somewhat reminiscent of that of Rigoberta Menchú who was not included as co-author of the novel that drew upon many elements of her own life (though Nissán appears to have been far more involved with technical and practical elements concerning the development of the manuscript than Menchú). Rosa Nissán also spoke out herself and used others to make her feelings known and attempted to rectify what she believed was a case of unjustly withheld recognition. In Rosa Nissán's case, in effect, the subaltern talks back, even though there may have been

an initial hesitation (this vacillation may have been due to a steep learning curve): ‘Me costó trabajo asumir que Hugo me tratara injustamente, por esa razón cometí el error de postergar este reclamo’ (Nissán 1994). This example demonstrates how inexperience can lead to a kind of artistic subalternity which can be denounced but not easily rectified.

While on the one hand Nissán’s intervention does appear to have had an effect on the public perception of the film, since shortly following Nissán’s public declaration some journalists began to include her as one of the scriptwriters when referring to this movie (García 1994 & de la Vega 1994b), on the other it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Guita Schyfter and Hugo Hiriart did have the last word. What looks to be the final article published with respect to this polemic between Rosa Nissán, Guita Schyfter, and Hugo Hiriart offered a fresh view of the events that led up to the creation of *Novia que te vea*, and it offers Schyfter’s perspective. When asked what Nissán’s participation was in relation to the script, Schyfter minimized her collaboration by claiming much of the credit for herself and focusing on the idea of ‘argument’ of the production instead of the ‘script’:

El argumento no se adaptó de la novela de Rosa Nissán. La idea de la película yo la tenía clara desde 1985, desde entonces le pedí a Hugo Hiriart que realizara un guión que abordara la vida de los judíos en países extraños a su cultura. [...] Hablé con Rosa Nissán y le dije que me gustaría adaptar algunas partes de su novela al guión que iba a escribir Hiriart, así fue como entró la familia de judíos sefarditas a la película.
(Ríos Alfaro 1994)

Here, the director has emphasized that she was the creator of the film's argument. Significantly Schyfter traced the origins of her idea to 1985, prior to the publication of Nissán's novel. That made it possible for Schyfter to be able to assert a claim of authenticity that would appear to supersede Nissán's. Schyfter's statement that claimed she would only like to adapt some parts of Nissán's novel helped to minimize Nissán's contribution. Though anyone who has read the novel and watched the movie would realize that even though their initial plan was to limit their use of episodes from the novel, both the directors and scriptwriters did, in fact, include quite a large number of them in the end, as significant portions of the film follow Nissán's narrative quite closely. Moreover, nowhere in the article in which Schyfter attempted to defend herself, does she mention Nissán's collaboration in writing the script (acknowledged in García López's [1994] article mentioned earlier) nor does she comment on Nissán's contribution with respect to Ladino. In almost every respect it appears that Nissán's influence on and contribution to the film, whose title carries the same name as her novel and whose protagonist bears the same name as Nissán's, has been blatantly minimized. A review of the press articles covering this polemic during those two months in 1994, leaves the distinct impression that, in this case, there was a definite attempt to erase the originator from the final product, thereby reducing Nissán to a state of artistic subalternity.

The next section of this chapter will analyze how the subaltern is portrayed in *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*. Moreover, it will include a discussion of the use of subaltern language (specifically Ladino Spanish), as well as important themes (including the increasing marginalization of the protagonist) along with the unique

techniques found in both novels. Then the focus will shift to attempting to analyze the representation of the subaltern voice in these two novels.

One of the elements that makes Rosa Nissán's novels unique is her use of Judeo-Spanish. As noted in the introduction of this chapter, Daniel Cazés has claimed that *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* are the first (and possibly only) Sephardic Mexican narratives ever to have been published in contemporary Mexico. Though the novel is mainly written in modern Spanish, throughout both books Oshinica's mother and several other significant characters speak almost exclusively in Judeo-Spanish. In his essay, 'The Language of African Literature', Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o argues that one of the characteristics of the subaltern is his use of a language which is different from the one imposed by the colonial powers (1997, 285-86). Several of Nissán's characters follow that pattern. They are speakers of Judeo-Spanish in a society made up almost entirely of citizens who employ modern Mexican Spanish in their daily communication. The language spoken by certain members of Oshinica's community could be considered to be the voice of the subaltern simply by virtue of its divergence from the established linguistic standard in Mexico. However, when contemplating this subject it is imperative to ask whether or not these voices are authentic or simply another example of *costumbrismo* – 'a description of archaic and disappearing customs and traditions as represented in chronicles, novels, paintings, and engravings' (Franco 2002, 316)¹³ – which Nissán has invented to make her novel appear more legitimate and attractive to the reader. This next section will analyze the authenticity of the Judeo-Spanish one finds in *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* and comment on its significance.

Judeo-Spanish, which is also often referred to as Ladino,¹⁴ is the language spoken by many Jews who were forced out of Spain in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Previous to the edict issued by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in the late 1400s that demanded the expulsion or conversion of non-Catholics, Spain had been home to a large and powerful Jewish community for more than a thousand years. The Iberian Peninsula is said to have been the land that gave to the Hebrew people its greatest philosophers, intellectuals, poets, doctors, and translators; and is considered to be the country where Judaism experienced its golden age (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 13). Following their expulsion from Spain (officially completed in 1492), the Sephardic Jews settled in the following four areas: The Netherlands, France and Italy, Northern Africa, and the Ottoman Empire (Revah and Enriquez 1998, 41). In these different countries the new communities that developed continued to speak Judeo-Spanish amongst themselves, so preserving their Jewish identity in their new place of residence. However, having lost most, if not all, of their direct contact with Spain, the language the Sephardic Jews spoke to each other evolved differently from the Spanish spoken in the Iberian Peninsula. In some ways Judeo-Spanish remained in its medieval form, while the Spanish spoken in Spain and elsewhere continued to evolve into its present state. Nevertheless, at the same time this Semitic language also adopted words and linguistic characteristics found in their new homelands, forming a new language with a specific religiously-inflected cultural identity.

In the light of this brief introduction, it is now possible to consider more closely the individual case of the literature in question. When Rosa Nissán was questioned about the authenticity of the Judeo-Spanish spoken by several characters in her novels she

claimed that it is: ‘totalmente auténtico porque así se oye’ (IRN2).¹⁵ Nissán explained that she learned the language from her mother (a Sephardic Jew originally from Istanbul, Turkey) and that while creating *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*, she simply ‘recre[a] el ladino, recreando las conversaciones que había escuchado en mi casa’ (IRN2). Nissán has stated that the Judeo-Spanish found in her narratives mirrors faithfully the language of native speakers of her acquaintance in Mexico City. However, the one admission this author did make is that she had Hispanicized (or in her own words: ‘[el ladino] lo castellanice’ [IRN3]¹⁶) this language by writing it phonetically in Spanish.¹⁷

Although Nissán’s claims regarding the authenticity of the Judeo-Spanish found in her texts are convincing, this study will now seek to reinforce them by comparing the speech found in her narratives with independent sources. To do this, the books *Diccionario Básico Ladino-Español* (1977) and *Estudios sobre el judeo-español en México* (1998) will be used as points of reference.

Estudios sobre el judeo-español en México is possibly the most complete study published on this particular subject. Apart from tracing the history of the language, it also includes a socio-cultural description as well as detailing many of the linguistic characteristics found in those who speak the language in this particular country. The authors, Renée Revah and Hector Enríquez, describe three categories that can be used to illustrate particular characteristics of Judeo-Spanish in Mexico: morphophonetical, grammatical, and lexical. Making use of these three classifications of variance from modern Spanish, it is possible to compare Nissán’s texts with the examples Revah and Enríquez describe. This next section makes the necessary analysis needed to further

measure the authenticity of the Judeo-Spanish in Nissán's first two novels, *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* by applying to them the norms identified by Revah and Enríquez¹⁸:

Morphophonetical

The closure of vowels

1. The “e” closes into an “i”.

examples: *dizía*, *dizir*, *lingua*, *vizina* (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 131)

In *Novia que te vea* (NTV) we find p.38 *vicinos*, p.64 *pishcado* (pescado)

In *Hisho que te nazca* (HTN) we find p. 52 *mishor* (mejor), p.253 *siguro*, p. 275 *siguro*

2. The “o” closes into a “u”.

examples: *kusía* (cosía), *kusina* (cocina), *durmir* (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 131)

NTV p.33 *durmingo*, p.118 *murí*, p.176 *durmir*

HTN p. 50 *cucinamos*

Diphthongation

1. The “ue” becomes an “o”.

examples: *akordo*, *a forze* (a fuerzas), *proba* (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 133)

NTV p. 38 *me acodro*, p. 118 *mos acordimos*

HTN p. 31 *se acodra* (this is also an example of metathesis – please note additional examples in the following section)

2. The diphthong “ie” becomes “e”.

examples: *entendes*, *febre*, *gobierno* (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 133)

HTN: p. 31 *quere*, p. 248 *pensas*, p. 251 *aséntate*, p. 253 *quen* (quien)

Consonant Change

1. In some cases the “n” becomes an “m”.

examples: *muera* (nuera), *muestra* (nuestra), *muez*, *mosotros* (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 134)

NTV p. 23 *muera*, p. 23 *muestra* (nuestra), p. 23 *mosotros*

2. Metathesis. The most frequent example of metathesis in Judeo-Spanish occurs within the group “rd” which is transformed into “dr”.

examples: *akodro* (auerdo), *godro* (gordo), *tadre* (tarde), *vedre* (verde) (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 134)

NTV: p. 29 *vedrá* (verdad), p. 112 *tadrar* (tardar), p. 119 *vedre* (verde), p. 119 *bodrados* (bordados)

HTN: p. 47 *godro* (gordo), p. 80 *pedriendo* (perdiendo), p. 131 *guadras* (guardas),
p. 253 *tadramos* (tardamos)

Grammatical differences

1. Changes in gender of nouns.

examples: *la calor*, *la comité* (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 136)

NTV: p. 158 *las postemas* (los problemas)

2. The construction of plurals using particles from Hebrew. In Judeo-Spanish this is often seen with the partical “im” to indicate plural.

example: *ladronim* (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 136)

NTV: p. 102 *los kibutzim*

HTN: p. 64 *los bajurim*

3. The use of the particle “iko” as a diminutive.

examples: *bandidiko*, *departamentiko*, *merkadiko*, *pasteliko*, *pepiniko*, *tomatiko*

(Revah and Enríquez 1998, 136)

NTV: p. 30 *bolillicos*, p. 111 *rosica*, p. 176 *carica*, *sobrinica*, *ventanica*

HTN: p. 46 *preciadica*, p. 70 *comidica*, p. 253 *palticos*

4. The present tense of the first person plural. In order to conjugate the first person plural (this is also repeated in the past simple) the ending changes from “amos” to “imos” with “ar” verbs.

examples: *mirimos, pasimos, pensimos, regresimos, enseñimos* (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 136-37)

NTV: p. 27 *quedimos*, p. 80 *tomimos*, p. 119 *empapimos, lleguimos*

5. In the first person singular of the past simple, the regular conjugation of the “ar” verbs changes from “e” to “i”.

examples: *asperí, enkontrí, kontí, me kansí, preguntí, topí, trabahí* (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 137)

NTV: p. 23 *lleguí*, p. 45 *probí*, *llení*, p. 176 *alevantí, bañí, topí*

HTN: p. 252 *probí*

6. The second person singular of the past simple moves the “s” in the middle of the regular Spanish conjugation to a “s” at the end.

examples: *apuntates* (apuntaste), *bautizates, desayunates, entendites, lavates* (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 137)

HTN: p. 252 *vites, alimpiates*

7. For the verbs “ser” and “estar” in Judeo-Spanish one finds: *yo so, yo sto, tu sos, sta, staba*. (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 137)

NTV: p. 29 *me estó*, p. 181 *sos tú*

8. The verb “ir” presents itself as *yo vo*, *vate* (imperative) in the present tense.

(Revah and Enríquez 1998, 137)

NTV: p. 64 *me vo*, p. 95 *vo a demandar*

HTN: p. 58 *te vo a dar*, p. 139 *vo a meter*

9. The pronoun of the first person plural changes from “n” to “m”: *mosotros*, *mos*, *muestras*. (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 138)

NTV: p. 23 *mosotros*, p. 27 *mos*, p. 29 *muestras*

HTN: p. 59 *mos*, p. 89 *muestras*, *mosotras*

10. The use of the word *kualo* (cual) as an interrogative pronoun. (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 139)

NTV: p. 31, 117, 118, 151

HTN: p. 253

11. The preposition “*ma*” is used in the same fashion as “pero”. (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 139)

NTV: p. 95, 119

HTN: p. 276

Lexical Elements

With respect to the authenticity of the lexical elements found in *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*, it is important to note that the small collection of dictionaries that do record Judeo-Spanish fall far short of offering a comprehensive analysis of the complete language. Due to the lack of written materials in Judeo-Spanish, these dictionaries will often depend greatly on oral informants or a few isolated texts (or both) for the gathering of data. Revah and Enríquez's study creates a brief glossary of approximately 250 words unique to Judeo-Spanish, whereas Pascual Recuero has created a small but more extensive collection. A comparative analysis between these texts and the Ladino found in Rosa Nissán's novels leads the reader to the conclusion that both dictionaries are far from offering a complete spectrum of this language. This is because, while there were many words that could be found in both of the linguistic books mentioned, most of the vocabulary Nissán used in her novels is absent from official dictionaries used in this study. At the same time however, it is imperative to state that when Nissán employed a Judeo-Spanish word that was found in Pascual Recuero's dictionary or Revah and Enríquez's glossary, the word coincided with the established definition. The only discrepancies between them, when they did occur, concern spelling.¹⁹ The following is a sample of words encountered in *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* that are listed in Revah and Enriquez's glossary:

agora p. 112 HTN

ande p. 177 NTV

ashugar p. 15 NTV

benadam p. 112 HTN

engrandesir p. 48 NTV

expandir p. 43 NTV

fuirse p. 64 NTV

haftoná p. 27 NTV (spelt *jaftoná*)

kal p. 35 NTV

kualo p. 80 HTN (spelt *cuálo*)

pishar p. 138 NTV

preziado p. 46 HTN

regalado p. 170 HTN

topar p. 117 NTV

zoná p. 212 HTN (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 142-47)

A comparison with Pascual-Romero's dictionary confirmed some of those same words seen in the sample above as well as presenting other new matches to consider. This time, instead of a textual analysis, an analysis of the glossaries²⁰ located at the end of *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* was employed. In this example, the words in parenthesis represent the spelling variation presented by Pascual-Romero:

agera

amá

babashada (babacada)

bamias

borrecas (borekas)

buraco (burako)

Eropa

fedor

fuir

jasino (jazino)

osho (ozo)

pará

pishar (pixar)

tadramos

topar

tornar (Pascual-Romero 1977)

The fact that many of the words found in Nissán's narrative are not found in the Revah's glossary nor in Pascual Romero's dictionary could also be interpreted as an additional proof that Nissán's Judeo-Spanish is authentic. It could be argued that Nissán's inclusion of Ladino words that were not found in established dictionaries indicates the use of natural and authentic sources of a language that, in its majority, is now oral in nature. Had Nissán only used words found in established dictionaries it could conceivably be concluded that she had simply used these books in order to create the illusion of native speakers employing the language instead of recreating actual use. Her use of both

officially recognized and non-officially recognized Judeo-Spanish vocabulary appears to strengthen the argument that the Judeo-Spanish encountered in these novels is authentic.

With the social-cultural information Revah and Enríquez provide in their analysis on those that speak Judeo-Spanish, it is also possible to study the cultural aspects that have been linked to native speakers of this language as well. By comparing the social-linguistic information these academics have documented with the traits and speech used by the characters in Nissán's novel, it is possible to reinforce our claim that the Ladino found in *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* has come from a living community and is not just an example of *costumbrismo*.

In *Estudios sobre el judeo-español en México*, Revah and Enríquez indicate that in Turkey in the 19th century the Judeo-Spanish community began to be highly influenced by the French language. This was especially true of the upper classes, even to the point that in some families of high social categories French begins to displace Judeo-Spanish:

El judeo-español para las clases altas deja de ser una lengua de comunicación en la comunidad judía y se vuelve una lengua familiar, con una fuerte influencia francesa. [...] El francés es otra variedad 'alta' que se considera partidora de cultura y se utiliza en la escuela, la escritura, y la literatura. (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 96)

This perception of French as a language of cultural distinction is reflected in Nissán's fiction. One of the points that characterizes Oshinica's mother is her feeling of superiority

over her husband and his family. A way she asserts her superior upbringing vis-à-vis her partner and others by reference her education: ‘Yo en Estambul iba a las mejores escuelas, mos²¹ daban las clases en francés. La familia de mi mamá sí es de categoría’ (Nissán NTV, 27). At another point, the narrator also confirms her link to the upper class (as well as that of another Sephardic women) by their ability to speak French: ‘La madre [de un médico que Oshinica conoce] es una señora de lo meshor, ya estuve hablando en francés con ella, salimos parientes, una prima de Estambul es su sobrinica’ (Nissán NTV, 148). Though there are only two occasions when Oshinica’s mother makes reference to the use and importance of French in her education, these cultural references pertaining to the Sephardic culture (i.e. French = high culture) greatly strengthen the argument that the language source Nissán uses is authentic.

Another way in which Nissán has shown a French influence in her novels is through the protagonist’s first name. In an interview the author revealed that the origin of her main character’s first name is actually a combination of Judeo-Spanish and French: ‘Para el nombre de mi protagonista yo quería un nombre que terminara con ‘ica’ [un diminutivo típico del judeo-español]. “Oshiní” viene del francés y significa “Eugenia”. De allí saco “Oshinica”. Tengo una amiga judía que se llama así’ (IRN3). The main character’s name, which to some could appear quite odd or out of place, is actually an additional element that also helps to confirm the cultural authenticity of Nissán’s novels.

The final social-linguistic element that is described as being very typical of Sephardic culture, and is found in Nissán’s novels, is the use of proverbs. Revah and Enriquez state: ‘El refrán, es un elemento fundamental del habla de los sefardíes, y sobretodo de las mujeres’ (Revah and Enriquez 1998, 109). Though many people speak

in *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*, the only ones who use proverbs when they do so are the Sephardic women. This is especially true of Oshinica's mother. The men do not employ them at all – with the exception of one proverb Oshinica's father used once in both novels. Since none of the men are of Sephardic origin, it would appear logical to observe this occurrence.

The way the majority of these *refranes* are used can be divided into two categories and reveal additional cultural information from within the novel as well. Many of the proverbs are simply a unique method - peculiar to a specific culture - of describing people and feelings. 'Me murí del zar' (Nissán NTV, 112) means that someone is scared to death and makes reference to a time when the Sephardic Jews were ruled by Czars. 'Sano como un pishcado' (Nissán NTV, 64) states that some one is healthy by comparing them to a fish, instead of an apple ('Sana como una manzana' [Varela and Kubarth 1994, 162]) - as one usually does in modern Spanish. Other proverbs are used to describe desires and warnings. Admonitions such as: 'te van a dar culo de pepino' (Nissán NTV, 140) make reference to receiving a useless piece of vegetable instead of: 'Dar [vender] gato por liebre' (Varela and Kubarth 1994, 117) when someone has been cheated out of something. However, the *refranes* that describe desires are much more culturally revealing. The best examples of these are the titles of the novels. *Novia que te vea* - which could be translated as meaning 'I wish to see you a bride' - illustrates the strong social pressure experienced by Sephardic women to marry. This is one of the principal themes of the first novel. The second title follows with another Sephardic proverb that expresses the parent's strong desire for her daughter to bear a son: 'Hisho que te nazca'. Child bearing and rearing can definitely be viewed as one of the main themes of the

second half of Nissán's narrative. The *refranes* in these novels serve a dual purpose. The first one is to confirm that this voice is authentic because it reflects linguistic usage within the Judeo-Spanish community. The other is that it helps to understand values that are found within this culture also: the importance of marriage and of bearing a son.

Having confirmed Nissán's statement that the Judeo-Spanish in her novels is authentic, it now becomes helpful to consider the way in which it is used and its significance. In both *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*, Ladino appears to represent many things. It is the voice of immigrants, the voice of the Old World with the traditions that accompany it. This language represents customs, mostly conservative ones that have changed little with the passing generations. Judeo-Spanish is the voice of family. It is spoken amongst relatives and close friends. It is the whisperings of intimacy. Typically, it is the voice of closed spaces, of kitchens, of living rooms, and of bedrooms. Most often women use this language. In Nissán's narrative, this tongue is commonly found being used to tell family history and speak of religion, give advice and lay down family law. Judeo-Spanish speaks of food, of children, of the past and of the future. In this author's novel it is most often used to represent the mother because she is the character who speaks it most often and is the person who the protagonist links to this language.

One of the ways in which Nissán's novels do not reflect her own life, though, is the way Oshinica employs Ladino. Though she does not speak Judeo-Spanish with her own children, she has clarified: 'Yo lo uso con mi mamá, la veo y me sale automático' (IRN2). However, the character Oshinica in both novels rarely used Judeo-Spanish, and when she does it is most often in the form of isolated words or phrases and not in

conversation. There are different hypotheses as to why this should be so, and its significance within the text.

As the reader studies the text paying particular attention to the relationship between the mother and the daughter, it becomes evident they do not appear to be very close. In fact, during both novels Nissán does not construct any lengthy conversations between these two women at all. Oshinica commented on this lack of communication toward the end of her adolescence as she began courting:

León ya quiere formalizar relaciones. Mi mamá está feliz; lo que me extraña es que de chiquita ni me pelaba; ahora cuando llego tarde, me está esperando dizque para platicar; la saludo y me escapo a mi cuarto porque no tengo ganas de hablar, pero ella está enterita. (Nissán NTV, 105)

This quote demonstrates the absence of a close relationship between the mother and her child. Oshinica felt it was odd that her mother wanted to be close to them given how she had treated her during her childhood. It seems that, as Oshinica was close to entering into the adult world of marriage and family, her mother began to take an interest in her. Possibly because they would have begun to have more in common at that point. A relationship that was not created during youth was attempted at maturity. However, one must not think that, in these two novels, the main character has been singled out to receive this type of treatment from the mother. A similar set of circumstances characterizes both *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*. Conversations between

children and mothers (and most adults) simply do not appear to exist.²² It is as though a barrier has been placed between these two generations.

Another possibility for the marked linguistic division in her narratives is that Nissán wanted to stress the differences between the ‘Old World’ (Turkey) in which the mother had once lived and brought with her to her new country of residence and the ‘New World’ (Mexico) of which Oshinica formed a part. The difference in idiom helped to solidify the dichotomy that existed between the two females. Oshinica considered herself modern and liberal in her views and actions with respect to education, family, sex and relationships. Her mother, on the other hand, saw herself as being conservative and traditional in almost every aspect of her life. The lack of communication between the two helps to exemplify the differences between the two women and their inability to interact. In addition to highlighting the traditionalism found in the mother, the distinct language each one speaks helps to show how the daughter had made a break from the past and the Sephardic community and was attempting to become a part of the modern culture of Mexico. Had Nissán recreated a world in which mother and daughter had more open communication and spoke the same language the effect would have been quite distinct. It could have given the impression of the continuity of tradition and the preservation of the language.

Notwithstanding the fact that the main character did not speak Ladino with anyone in the novel, she did use Judeo-Spanish words from time to time. The way she used them is also revealing. The most common way in which Oshinica used Judeo-Spanish was to refer to one of her actions that caused her the most embarrassment: the fact that she wet the bed. ‘Otra vez me pishé’ (Nissán NTV, 28). As a child, Oshinica told

the reader that she believed her bedwetting was the reason why her mother loved her less than her brother who did not have this habit. Oshinica even agreed that her mother should feel this way: ‘¿tiene razón mi mamá en querer más a Moshón! Él es muy limpio. ¿Cómo le harán los que no se pishan? (Nissán NTV, 28). The use of a foreign word to describe this unpleasant happening could have been a way in which the character distanced herself from an act that made her feel dirty, less loved, and less worthy of her mother’s affection. As a married woman this word almost disappeared completely because she stopped wetting the bed. However, in compensation the reader encounters the arrival of a new, and somewhat more varied, vocabulary in Ladino: that of traditional food. Perhaps one of the only ways in which Oshinica does not fully abandon her cultural roots is through her eating habits. In this case though, she was not exclusive but simply widened her range of acceptance to include almost all kinds of food from the cultures with which she came into contact, Sephardic (in her family), Arabic (in her husband’s family), and Mexican (in her own country). Though Oshinica broke away from her mother’s traditions in many ways, through food it is possible to see that some connections (the ones this character found agreeable) were still kept. Old words are still used, because new ones have not been created in the modern language to name the traditional flavors.

When summarizing this discussion on the authenticity of Judeo-Spanish in Rosa Nissán’s novels, three different points merit our attention. Firstly, Rosa Nissán, who herself is of Sephardic origin, has stated she has direct contact with the language in question through her family and community. That being the case, she claims that the Judeo-Spanish she uses in her novels is authentic due to the fact that she lifted it directly from conversations she had with native speakers. Aside from the Nissán’s affirmations,

through the use of a comparative study, the two independent academic sources, Ravah and Enríquez and Pascual Recuero, confirm that the different linguistic aspects of the Ladino used in these novels conform to the norms they establish with relation to the use of Judeo-Spanish. In addition to reference to the language itself, the social linguistic and cultural information connected to the Sephardic community in Mexico that Revah and Enríquez put forward in their book offers additional proof to the authenticity of several cultural signifiers in Nissán's novels. Having reviewed this information it is possible to argue that *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* are not simply 'cuadros de costumbres' but what appear to be the voice of the subaltern based in a verifiable reality. With these tenets established, it is then possible to consider some of the other important aspects of this language in the text such as its use and possible cultural significance both of which create a greater understanding of Nissán's fiction.

As this chapter moves from a linguistic to a more textual analysis, in order to aid the reader who is not familiar with Rosa Nissán's narratives that are studied in this chapter, a brief synopsis of both books will follow. In this chapter these two novels will be considered as one continuous narrative rather than two shorter ones. This is because *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* are two parts of one whole (in the English translation *Like a Bride and Like a Mother* [2002] both texts have been combined into one book). The main characters in the first novel are essentially the same as in the second novel and the second follows the first chronologically.

Novia que te vea begins when the narrator and main character, Oshinica, was seven years old and was growing up in a Jewish home in one of the most Catholic areas of Mexico City (close to La Basílica de Guadalupe). However, shortly into the novel the

protagonist, her family and friends moved to a Jewish community in another part of the Mexican Capital. There, her life alternated between school, home, synagogue, and sports center; all of them connected to the close-knit Semitic community. As the character grew older her family applied an increasing amount of pressure on Oshinica to leave school and marry a suitable man. Though she does not really want to, the main character left her studies and married her boyfriend Lalo.

As the first novel ended in Oshinica's wedding the second one began with her honeymoon. Soon Oshinica fell pregnant with her first child and three more soon followed. At this point in the narrative time passed quickly, Lalo's business ventures were successful and they soon found themselves in the *nouveaux-riches* suburbs of the Mexican capital. However, the protagonist was unhappy and, when returning to formal education, she felt attracted to life outside her Jewish community. This brought much contention to Oshinica's family and with time her marriage deteriorated and ended in divorce. From this point, the main character entered the labor force and continued her schooling. She learned to write with the help of a literary workshop. The second novel ended with the publication of the protagonist's first novel and her resolution to become a professional writer.

One of the major themes demonstrated in *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* is marginalization. It is an element that is present in many different ways throughout both novels. These narratives could possibly be interpreted as the story of a woman who flees from the different circles of friends and family that oppress her in search of her own liberation from subalternity through education and writing. On the other hand, a closer rereading of these two books tends to reveal that these narratives

view subalternity as a fatalistic, never-ending, inescapable cycle in which the protagonist remains permanently entrapped. The characters are able to change (become richer, more educated, more religious) but their subaltern status remains constant. It can be argued that the more the protagonist struggles to leave subalternity, the tighter it grips her. Often, in Nissán's work, this condition is portrayed as self-imposed in many ways. *Novia que te vea* displays this on a family level and, at times, on an individual one as well.

Nonetheless, one of the elements of these novels is the fact that the protagonist, although she attempts to 'exit' marginalization, appears to be increasingly subalternized by practically every element she encounters.

At the beginning of the novel, Oshinica and her family lived very close to the important symbols of Catholicism in Mexico (one of those that has been previously mentioned is the cathedral la Basílica de Guadalupe). As there were only a few Jewish families living in that area, they were all obliged to attend local schools where the strong influence of the predominant religion prevailed. The effects of this education appear to have molded Oshinica when the reader first encounters this character:

A las ocho de la mañana antes de empezar a estudiar, se reza; juntamos las palmas de las manos cerca de la boca, cerramos los ojos y decimos la oración al mismo tiempo; se oye padrísimo. [...] El otro día [mi mamá] me dijo: “preferiría que te salieras a la hora de los rezos”, pero yo no quiero: preguntarían por qué me salgo y además a mí me gusta rezar.

(Nissán NTV, 9-10)

At this point Oshinica considers herself to be what could be called an ‘unofficial Catholic’. She would go to mass, cross herself, say her prayers, and believed that following those religious practices would save her on the day of final judgement. The reader can observe that during this period larger popular culture has more of an influence on her than did her family practices. This belief had grown to the point that Oshinica even attends catechism classes secretly with the help of some of her friends:

Yo nunca faltó [al catecismo] [...] me voy al catecismo a escondidas, porque quiero hacer mi primera comunión y sólo ellas me pueden ayudar a salvarme del juicio final, y a lo mejor por mí, Dios perdona a toda mi familia. (Nissán NTV, 14)

This quote also helps to clearly demonstrate that, at that time in her life, Oshinica is shown to be more inclined to succumb to the attraction of the larger Catholic society as opposed to her own community. This is perhaps the only time in the novel when the protagonist does not appear to feel marginalized, but rather different.²³ Though she is aware of her family’s beliefs she feels more comfortable attempting to belong to the bigger picture than remaining at the margin. This could also be due to the fact that she was isolated from other Jewish children and families at this age.

However, before the protagonist was able to take her first Holy Communion, her parents met with other Jews in the area where she lived and were able to make arrangements to send them and their neighbors to a Jewish school. As a consequence of this event, there is a radical change in the narrative. The protagonist’s social movement

shifts from societal mainstreaming to marginalization as her circle of friends become Jewish and Judaism becomes a major focus for her. She learns Jewish history and Hebrew in her classes as well as fraternizing both in and out of school with those of her religious community. In contrast to Oshinica, who had more Catholic friends while living in La Villa, her parents' closest friends always appear to have been Jewish: 'En la colonia Industrial vivimos varias familias de paisanos: son los amigos más queridos de mis papás; desde antes de casarse eran íntimos' (Nissán NTV, 14). Her father explained that from the time he arrived in Mexico from Israel: 'Hice muy buenos amigos; hasta la fecha vienen a saludarme, Efrén el que vende pollos casher en Medellín, estudió conmigo' (Nissán NTV, 81). He is not portrayed as having been interested in becoming integrated into Mexican society like the protagonist, but rather as someone who is content in his particular social niche. This can be considered to be one of the points that differentiates Oshinica from most of the other characters in the novels. Whereas the other characters tend to gravitate toward the margins, Oshinica is often portrayed as desiring to venture towards the center of Mexican society. However, despite the main character's lack of desire to abandon her first primary school and friends, the family did leave and their friends and relatives enclosed themselves within their community even more by moving to the same neighborhood and filling it with members of their community:

Por aquí sí tengo un chorro de amigos de la escuela, dondequiera hay paisanos: a lo mejor ni hay católicos, no estoy segura. Todos los que vivimos en la colonia Industrial, ya nos pasamos por acá y quedamos muy

cerca unos de los otros. Hasta mi abuelito dejó su casa en Calzada de los Misterios [...] (Nissán NTV, 17)

It is interesting that the protagonist views this unique space as though it were wholly unremarkable. In this new environment Oshinica was not even sure if there were any non-Jews. This quote helps to create a clearer idea of the level of enclosure felt by the protagonist, as well as giving the reader an idea as to the composition of the new main space that would serve as the backdrop for the rest of the novel. If one analyzes this setting, it becomes more than evident that although Nissán has set her novel in Mexico City - like thousands of other Mexican authors – in this particular case she has recreated for the reader a very unique space within the capital. This is one of the elements that sets her apart from many of her contemporaries.

Physical isolation is not the only element the community used in this novel to indicate subalternity. Apart from the tangible separation from the rest of mainstream Mexican society and her private Jewish schooling, Oshinica is further set apart from the rest of Mexico by her only other outside activities: going to their community's synagogue and spending her free time in a youth center her school created: la Juventud Sionista Sefardí. This, along with a Jewish sports center (Centro Deportivo Isrealita) that Oshinica describes as 'mi casa desde hace años' and 'nuestra única diversión [de nuestra familia]' (Nissán NTV, 142), made it possible for Oshinica and the rest of her family to cut the rest of Mexico out and live in an almost exclusively Jewish world. However, that appeared to be their purpose in creating these living conditions. These two leisure centers appear to form a dual purpose: a place adequate for isolation and indoctrination.

Ironically, although there are some exceptions, the Sephardic Jewish community in Nissán's novel does not only isolate itself from mainstream Mexican society, but it also abstains from fraternizing with other Jewish communities. In the following quote, Oshinica explains this situation to a non-Jewish classmate at *la Universidad Femenina*:

-Oye Oshinica, ¿por qué no te llevas con tus paisanas del salón? Ellas siempre están juntas.

-Han de ser amigas desde chiquitas; yo no las conocía.

-¿Pos qué no se conocen todos los judíos de México?

-No, nunca las había visto, con todo y que viven cerquita de mi casa, pero ni en el deportivo; son de otra comunidad, de otro colegio.

-¿Pos qué cómo está eso?

-Espérate, Frida, te voy a platicar lo que un día nos explicó la morá Luvesky; no creas que yo sé mucho. La morá dijo que los idish vienen de Alemania, Rusia, de por esos rumbos; son güeros y de ojo azul. Yo pertenezco a la comunidad sefardí, y mi templo está en la calle de Monterrey; nuestros rezos tienen diferente estilo y hasta otra tonadita. Ella dijo que qué pueden tener en común los judíos que vienen de Alemania, Viena, Rusia, que se criaron oyendo Beethoven, Mozart, con Puschkin, con nosotros los sefaraditas, y con un tercer grupo: los judíos árabes, que estaban en Siria, Líbano, Egipto. Ni el idioma, ni la música, ni los bailes, ni la comida, ni la forma de ser, ni la de hablar, ni la de vestirse. Cada

grupo tomó las costumbres del país en donde estaban. Viven como vivían allá. Cuando la morá lo dijo, lloró. (Nissán NTV, 99)

Along with portraying a stereotype of how the Jews might be typically viewed in Mexico (that they all know each other), this quote is an excellent example that illustrates some of the different levels of marginalization found within the Jewish communities in Nissán's work. Not only do they separate themselves from the greater part of Mexican society they do not tend to fraternize on a regular basis with the other Jewish communities either. This group seems to view withdrawal from mainstream society as a means of preserving their community and its ideals intact. Nissán has shown that in her novel religion is not a cohesive factor between the different groups. The factors that brought these Jews together were first and foremost their school, synagogue sports center, and the location of country of origin, then language, music, dance food, personality, speech and dress were what establish a common link amongst these women. Notwithstanding the religious beliefs these groups have in common, it appears that it was mainly the combination of the culture of their country of origin that created cohesion amongst the different groups. Religion, it seems, hardly figures in this equation. This statement shatters the stereotype made by Oshinica's friend and splits up the Jewish subcultures within Mexico City from each other.

A close reading of *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* also reveals that within Oshinica's family and community there exists a further level of subalternization that tends to apply almost exclusively to the women who form a part of it. Further

consideration of Oshinica's role in the novel will serve to illustrate this heightened subalternization.

Oshinica's role within the family is more subservient than that of her brothers. During meal times she is assigned tasks in the kitchen and serving food while her brothers do not appear to have any responsibilities in the home. This caused the protagonist to complain on occasion: 'Las mujeres nos levantamos para ayudar; la mesa es de los hombres. – Moshón, no me ganes mi lugar. ¡Ya ves, mamá!, por eso no me gusta servir' (Nissán NTV, 80). Outside the home, in her father's shop, she is not allowed the same level of responsibility as her brother, despite being older:

Cuando se vende algo, las empleadas siempre le dan el dinero a Moshón porque él tiene las llaves de donde guarda mi pa sus secretos. Siempre con sus secretos; las cosas de dinero las habla con mi papá, cuidándose de que yo no oiga, como si fuera yo una extraña. [...]

-Oye, pa, ¿por qué le das las llaves nada más a él?, dámelas hoy a mí, ¿sí?

-Otro día. Se las doy a Moshón porque él es hombre .

(Nissán NTV, 125-26)

In this patriarchal family, Moshón, the oldest male child, is portrayed as the keeper of her father's secrets. He is given responsibility simply based on the fact that he is male and his sister is denied them because she is female. Moshón is seen to be the individual capable of carrying on the business whilst Oshinica is allocated the subordinate position of attending to the sales. This also demonstrates the different spheres of intimacy within

both novels and those who had access to them. The generally positive relationship between Oshinica and her father is occasionally strained by the preferential treatment accorded to Moshón. Oshinica's consequent feelings of resentment play a significant part in the remainder of the narrative.

Another way in which Oshinica is further subalternized because she is a woman is through her being denied access to the professional world. In part, this is achieved by restricting the amount of education she received. Being able to continue in school was something that worried Oshinica from an early age as she saw other girls taken out of their studies while still very young:

Ya este año terminó sexto. Casi todas las niñas las sacan de la escuela para que se queden en casa con su mamá; toman clases de corte, de cocina, repostería, y no sé cómo le hacen, pero de pronto se ponen muy bonitas y se casan. A los niños los dejan estudiar más. (Nissán NTV, 30)

In Oshinica's case, her parents decided to allow her to study a shorter degree that would enable her to finish quickly and earn some money before she got married. However, it should be noted that this was only permitted because she could attend a technical school for women only:

Hoy fuimos a la Universidad Femenina: la secretaria nos dio un folleto con las carreras cortas que hay ahí; no sé a cuál meterme; mi mamá dice que alguna que tenga taquigrafía y mecanografía, para que pueda trabajar

como secretaria, que se gana muy bien. ¿Para qué una larga? Luego nos casamos y ni terminamos [dice la mamá]. Tengo quince años, si hago una de tres y me caso a los dieciocho, está bien; suerte que hay universidades para mujeres; sólo por eso me dejaron seguir. (Nissán NTV, 94)

This passage also helps the reader to realize the degree of control Oshinica's parents have on her immediate and long-term future as well as their ability and willingness to limit and marginalize her. However, at the same time, it is possible to witness the protagonist's compliance with parental wishes (notwithstanding her own desires and age). When entering *la Universidad Femenina*, Oshinica considered herself fortunate that she was being permitted to continue her studies. However, some time later, after accompanying a friend to some of her classes at Mexico's largest public university, *la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, Oshinica feels cheated: 'Becky entró a la UNAM. Mi papá se enoja porque a cada rato digo: ¡qué suerte! [...] Como no tenía clases la acompañé a la Universidad. ¡Qué lugar más extraordinario [...] ¿Para esto servía la prepa? Pues, ¿no que no servía? Yo nunca podré estar inscrita aquí' (Nissán NTV, 127).

This point exemplifies some of the first realizations of subalternity by the main character and her resentment of them. Although Oshinica's parents truncated her possibilities for further education (by sending her to a technical school instead of a secondary school) the attitude and approach adopted by the parents with regards to her brother Moshón was completely different. The parents demand Moshón become a professional whether he wants it or not:

¡La revolución en la casa. Mamá ha llorado toda la tarde: Moshón no quiere seguir estudiando: apenas va en primero de prepa y ya se aburrió; quiere trabajar en la tienda y ganar dinero.

-¡Pero qué problema!, dice mi papá. [...]

¡Qué coraje!; si yo fuera la que no quiere estudiar, harían una fiesta para celebrarlo. (Nissán NTV, 142)

The quote above clearly illustrates the different standards to which the children are held (marriage for girls, profession for boys). It should also be noted that, by this point, Oshinica's attitude towards her parents and their permissions and prohibitions has clearly changed from gratitude to resentment. Nissán has amplified her protagonist's view of the world by allowing her to see her home life and her present situation from a different prospective.

While growing up, Oshinica found herself in a secondary position in many events, as in the washing rituals that take place before eating. In this instance all the women would receive their turn after the men. In addition, the main character felt separated, as was the case in the synagogue, where the woman could not sit with the men nor read from the Torah. On the occasions when she was searching for explanations of her subalternization she asked why these customs had been created the way they were; she received answers that were unsatisfactory to her. This dialogue between Oshinica, her grandfather, and then her aunt illustrates this point:

-Abuelito, yo también quiero subir al Sefer.

-Las mujeres no pueden...

-¿Por qué?

-Luego te explica tu tía, ahorita me voy a mi cuarto...

-Pero, abuelito, es que a mí también...

-Ven, Oshinica chula –dijo mi tía, y en la cocina me dijo con su voz

pequeñita: “Te voy a explicar; es que las mujeres, cada mes... ¿tú sabes, verdad? Estamos impuras, por eso nosotras... es un honor que sólo tienen ellos, ni modo que cada vez nos pregunten o nos revisen, ¿verdad, mi sobrina consentida?”, dijo abrazándome.

¡Qué raro que estemos impuras! (Nissán NTV, 82)

This passage shows the general type of the explanation that Oshinica receives within her family when she asks about or questions religious practice. Many of the answers are vague. Most of the time it is simply a case of saying: ‘that’s just the way it is’ or: ‘because the scriptures say so, that’s why’. The lack of further detail leaves Oshinica increasingly unsatisfied.

When the protagonist wanted to marry a young man who did not live up to her mother’s standard of approval, the protagonist’s parents decided to put Oshinica under constant vigilance so as not to let her ‘quemarse’ by secretly seeing her boyfriend. However, contrary to forcing Oshinica into obedience, this reaction pushes Oshinica more quickly into marriage. This is because her boyfriend/fiancee offers her more freedom than in her own home. Years later, while reflecting on her life, she makes this clear to the readers: ‘Me casé para ser más libre’ (Nissán HTN, 163). To Oshinica, Lalo

becomes one of the main ways in which it would be possible for her to be able to escape the marginalization she felt in her home and community. One of the liberties that he promises Oshinica was that she would be able to study if she decided to marry him:

-Cásate conmigo, te juro que no te vas a arrepentir, voy a hacerte feliz.

-Todavía no quiero, estoy contenta, ya aprendí muchas cosas. Estoy estudiando para laboratorista; pronto dejaré de ser secretaria; un día haré los análisis yo sola.

-¡Cásate conmigo y sigues estudiando!

Me le quedé viendo con la boca y los ojos bien abiertos.

-¿De veras no te importaría que siguiera estudiando?, ¿de verdad?

-¿Por qué habría de importarme? (Nissán NTV, 154)

Having been told by the other women in her community that men would not permit their wives to study (and this being one of Oshinica's greatest desires), Lalo's promise to allow her to continue with her education helped her decide to marry him. So the reader can see that the assurance of an escape route from the subalternization to which her family and community were subjecting her is a key factor. At that time, she believes this decision would break the cycle that entangles her.

Soon after marrying Lalo, Oshinica became pregnant and before long she was so busy with her life as a mother that she did not study nor work outside the home for some time. However, after a few years she did return to school. During this section of the novel, the whole question of subalternity, whether or not it affected her, and her efforts to

escape it, simply disappear from the protagonist's concerns. Nonetheless, when she returned to college, her husband became increasingly resentful of her and the time she spent away from the home. This attitude forces Oshinica to realize that her subaltern position had essentially remained the same. At this point, a tug-of-war ensues between Oshinica and the rest of her family: she wants to study and they want her to stay at home. One could say that this struggle is, on an underlying level, a struggle between those who wanted to keep Oshinica a subaltern and the main character's fight to avoid that fate. Believing that if she surrendered herself to her families' desires she would always remain marginalized, Oshinica chooses to separate from, and later divorce, her husband in order to continue studying and to escape what she considered to be her 'jaula' (Nissán HTN, 163). At that time, she saw her breaking with her family as the only possible way of escaping subalternity.

The protagonist's divorce is an important turning point in her story. Throughout the first book *Novia que te vea* and the first section²⁴ of *Hisho que te nazca*, the main character lives within the narrow confines of her tiny community encapsulated in one of the largest cities in the world. Though surrounded by a country dominated by Catholicism, *mestizos* and their culture, until her divorce the protagonist really only moves within a miniscule Eastern Mediterranean Sephardic Jewish community made up of immigrants and their children. Oshinica views her divorce and integration into the educational institution and the writers' workshop as a means of breaking away from her marginalized community into the mainstream of Mexican culture. The last two sections of the second novel deal mostly with how, in an attempt to escape subalternization within her family and community, Oshinica rejects aspects of her former life, community and

religion and tries to become a part of mainstream Mexico. However, even though at first glance it might appear that Oshinica has overcome marginalization by the changes she made in her life, she really has only become a subaltern in a different sphere, and in some ways is even more marginalized than before.

One of the ways in which this character symbolically departed from her community was to break its prohibitions. After each major taboo she broke in the novel, she tended to reaffirm to herself and to the reader that she was much happier than before and was much better off for having done so. It was as if the more she distanced herself from the norms of her community, the more she freed herself from marginality. One way in which this can be observed is the following sequence of events: upon separating from her husband Oshinica lived for a short while with her parents, but they proved to be as strict (if not stricter) with her as her husband. Since she had left her husband with the specific purpose of: '[...] hu[ir] de tanta respetabilidad' (Nissán HTN, 157) she promptly left her parents' home so she could go to a place where it was possible for her to: 'salir y llegar a la hora que se me pega la gana' (Nissán HTN, 159). That change in behavior on her part continued. After her first adulterous experience we read:

A tropezones, como pude, me animé. Eran muchos años de contener la curiosidad, de saber si los otros hombres hacían el amor igual. Y sí, sí es igual, pero es otro, cuerpo, otro olor, otra forma. Un hombre nuevo, del que no conoces qué camino tomarán sus manos, ni sus besos. (Nissán HTN, 182)

Here Oshinica proudly announced to the reader that she was able to fulfil several of her secret desires while describing what she believed she had learned from the experience. However, these feelings the character described appeared to intensify even more so when she had her first lover (as opposed to a one-night stand):

Tú eres el amante que tantos años soñé, te veo y te sonrío. Noches y noches esperé esta promesa, promesa que eres tú. Mis fantasías son realidad. Te tengo, nos tenemos. Me abrazas, me obligas a rodar y quedo debajo de tu cuerpo pesado; nuestros ojos bien abiertos se encuentran y se aprietan. Lloro, las lágrimas lavan mi cara, sonrías al sentirlas, abro mis ojos y te encuentro, te encuentro siempre sonriéndome con tenura. Quiero seguirte viendo, recordarte siempre así, mis ojos te ríen y tú también me ríes. Pronuncio tu nombre, despierto pronunciándolo, te nombro, ahora tengo tu nombre para cada amanecer. (Nissán HTN, 188)

Though so emotionally charged that it becomes difficult for the reader to consider it credible, the passage in which Oshinica describes her experience of having a lover seems to set the tone for the second and third part of the novel. That is: when I break my family's and community's rules I am finally free and happy. This could be described as a celebration of transgression. For her, that meant divorcing her husband, and working in a way that pleased herself, not raising her children conservatively, and basically doing what she wanted without trying to please her family. At the end of this narrative, Oshinica actually says goodbye to her community as she 'graduates' into the world of writers with

the publication of her first book: ‘Tímidamente, me voy haciendo escritora. ¿Cómo recibirá mi obra la comunidad? ¿Cómo los de fuera? Estoy asustada. Te dejo, me despido de ti. Y como dice mi mamá, “Caminos de leche y miel²⁵”’ (Nissán HTN, 290).

Nonetheless, when looking closer at *Hisho que te nazca* it becomes easier to see that the protagonist continues to be marginalized, by her own community, her family, and even by the new acquaintances she makes through her efforts to become part of mainstream Mexico.

In Oshinica’s attempt to ‘de-subalternize’ herself, she separated from her husband (because he controlled her) and decided she was not going to form any long-term relationships. Instead, she sustains a series of one-night stands. While it is true that she is no longer subject to her husband’s will, now she is arguably more subaltern in this situation because, as a participant in a brief love affair, she has been converted into a mere object of gratification. It is equally certain that at the same time the other person becomes the object of her pleasure, both have become merely sex objects. Oshinica’s only long-time love affair follows this same route. Though her paramour Victor swore that, even if Oshinica were ninety years old, he would still love her, when faced with the question of how permanent their relationship would be, his answer is: ‘Lo que nos dure’ (Nissán HTN, 186), and a short time later he leaves her for another woman his parents consider more appropriate for marriage.

Perhaps one of the most ironic elements of the second and third part of *Hisho que te nazca* is that the non-Jewish friends Oshinica made upon breaking with her community often subalternized the protagonist because of her Jewishness – the very same element of her life that Oshinica was fleeing. Another important point is that during the entirety of

the final two sections of the second novel, while Oshinica did mention several acquaintances she had made at school and the literary workshop, she made no mention of any close non-Jewish friends. The protagonist's new comrades often ridicule Oshinica because of the conservative lifestyle she had led for the greater part of her life and tease her because of her religion and the stereotypes that accompany it. In one episode they do so after Oshinica became scared when hearing a loud noise:

-¿Oyeron los cañonazos? Es 5 de mayo y dispararon no sé cuántos tiros al amanecer.

Angelica y yo nos miramos.

-¿Ya ves, gorda?, y tú ya estabas pecho a tierra.

-No sé por qué reaccioné así.

-Es que eres judía. Los judíos siempre creen que los van a atacar.

-¡Pero si yo nunca he vivido en una guerra!

-No, pero la paranoia no se les quita. Vamos a comprar algo para la comida. ¿Sabes manejar de velocidades? Porque yo no.

Saliendo del súper por poco y machuco a uno que quién sabe por dónde apareció, frené y me quedé muda, con los ojos cuadrados, me temblaban hasta los dientes.

-Sí, gorda, pero no fue porque eres judía, a cualquiera nos pasa. (Nissán HTN, 218)

This quote demonstrates one of greatest ironies of Nissán's second novel. Oshinica felt as if she were in conflict with Judaism and for that reason she distanced herself somewhat from her Jewish community. She rejected several of her religion's basic principles and, as a divorcee who was not content with being a homemaker, she was no longer readily accepted as an active part of her former circle of Jewish friends. None the less, notwithstanding the changes she has made to her life in order to participate in a cultural life that was closer to that of mainstream Mexico, her friends in her new social circle have difficulties in accepting her fully. These characters, consciously or unconsciously, hold Oshinica to a different standard. They stereotype her as a Jew even though Oshinica has transgressed many of her community's established norms and does not fully consider herself part of it any longer. While trying to integrate herself fully into her new circle of friends the fact that she, as a Jew, is fundamentally different almost always seems to be taken into account.

Apart from her choice of friends, one of the most marked changes in Oshinica after her separation and divorce concerns the way she is now treated by her family. Though they stop short of outright rejection of Oshinica or her lifestyle, many close family members criticize the different path she chose. Even her closest confidant in her family, her father, shows his disapproval of her choice: '*Hisha, ¿para cuánto se quería belantina?, no sé para cuánto te divorciaste, malo no era tu marido, lo quitaste loco. ¿Quién quiere una musher que vaya a la escola? Si mi musher me hubiera salido con esas babashadas, la mando al diablo*' (Nissán HTN, 253). One of her father's strongest criticisms occurs when Oshinica inquired as to why her parents had adopted a different

attitude and were not unhappy when Oshinica's sister studied a degree in psychology, after not approving of Oshinica's studies:

Mis papás no están enojados con Clarita, que estudia como loca, pues su marido está orgulloso de que su mujer será psicóloga.

-Ella estudia en serio, tú vas a perder el tiempo, *ninguna* de las cosas que haces son normales. Va a ser doctora –dice mi papá súper orgulloso.

(Nissán HTN, 233)

Her father's comments emphasize his belief that nothing Oshinica did could be considered normal and that was the reason he did not support her in her desire to transform her life. Once again, the protagonist, even when compared to other family members, appears to suffer more marginalization than the majority of the subaltern characters in Nissán's novels.

While Oshinica's father's reactions to her life do affect her, she is more marked by her children's response to her behavior. The abandonment of their mother by her children was a factor that detached Oshinica even further from her family and previous social contacts. Children usually stay with their mother following marriage break-up, but in this case, they take the father's side. Though in her home she had seen that two groups were forming between her children and her husband (the conservative) and herself (pro-change) Oshinica still does not expect her children to reject her:

¿O quieres que ellos decidan con quién se quieren quedar?

Acepté segura de ellos.

La grande dijo:

-Yo con mi pa.

La segunda:

-Yo con mi pa.

Mi beba lo mismo que sus hermanas, y el chiquito se solidarizó:

-Yo con mi pa –dijo sin saber que no se trataba de ir nada más al parque.

Me quedé paralizada, con los ojos desorbitados, viendo a Lalo triunfar.

(Nissán HTN, 153)

Being rejected by her own children affected Oshinica deeply. As the following quote shows, it traumatized her at first: ‘Llevo veinte días sin ver a los niños, cada vez que veo a una mujer embarazada o algo que tenga que ver con la crianza, me quiebro’ (Nissán HTN, 162), but this reaction changed with time. Instead of persuading her to change, Oshinica hardened her attitude towards her children: ‘Sentí que podía dejar de quererlos. Supe que pronto se pueden convertir en adultos despiadados’ (Nissán HTN, 163). This attitude isolated her even more. This event and the changes it brought about could be viewed as one of the ultimate marginalizations found in both novels. Though she did not like the fact that her children had chosen to stay with their father instead of with her, she gradually accepted this change and, rather than acting as a mother, she devoted more time to herself, her friends, and her career as a writer and photographer.

As the second novel draws to a close, the protagonist finds herself increasingly distanced from others. The role her children and other family members play in her life

decrease as the narration progresses. On the other hand, even though she is now somewhat isolated from her own family, she has not been able to replace it with her new group of friends. While they may have given her more freedom and encouraged her to better herself through study and experimentation with life, the relationship they form with Oshinica appears to be less personal than previous friendships. Now, instead of being accepted by her previous circle of Jewish friends and family she appears to be accepted only by her relatives. At the same time, her new friends only take part in her life while at school, related activities, or when having fun. They are never seen in the same intimate ‘in the home’ scenes that the reader had encountered when Oshinica was with her family. In short, their relationship with Oshinica is more shallow, and Oshinica could even be seen as a marginal figure within her new group of friends – ‘la gorda’ or ‘la judía’ as she is often called. In the protagonist’s efforts to leave a subalternized group within Mexico in order to become a part of mainstream society, Oshinica encounters partial rejection from her family while failing to be fully accepted by the larger group. Since she is no longer fully integrated into either group, and ultimately this character becomes arguably more subaltern than before.

What does the subalternization in these novels demonstrate? In one way it could be seen as a critique of the Jewish community for the ways in which it marginalized Oshinica. It could also be viewed as a criticism of Mexico by dint of its portrayal of the inflexible social structure the protagonist encountered as she attempted to move from one realm to another. The characters themselves often change throughout the course of the narrative, but their marginalization remains constant. The subalternity created in both of these novels allows us to focus on subalternity itself. Even while the character attempted

to reach the ‘center’, her rejection of precisely those factors she felt were subalternizing her, - while they did aid her in becoming a published author – only appear to have pushed her further towards the margins of society. Subalternity is seen as a never-ending, inescapable cycle. In this sense, both of Nissán’s novels promote a fatalistic view of subalternity. Similar in some ways to Spivak’s views on the subaltern, Nissán’s novels also suggest that access to the written word distances the subaltern from his subalternity. However, in this case, even though Nissán’s protagonist disassociates herself from her original subaltern acquaintances, she is unable to fully integrate herself into mainstream Mexican society.

Though we previously demonstrated that Rosa Nissán considers herself to have come from a subaltern sector of society in Mexico, when analyzing her novels with regard to the Spivakian question of whether or not the subaltern ‘speaks’, it is important to consider how much of her story is fiction and how much is linked to a verifiable reality. If it is a document based on real occurrences, then the reader can begin to consider the text with respect to whether or not the subaltern’s voice and context is represented. One of the striking statements, previously mentioned, that Rosa Nissán has repeatedly made about her fiction is that: ‘es casi autobiográfica, en ella hablo de cómo vive una familia judía en México’ (Inclán Perea 1992). This claim to autobiographical authenticity helps to strengthen the case that these two novels do indeed capture the subaltern voice and experience. However, there is one small problem. Even though Nissán claims that both of her first narratives encapsulate the story of her life, she also admits to fictionalizing some of it: if 70% of the novel is autobiography, 30% is not. The next part of this chapter will consider why Nissán would have utilized this narrative

strategy in addition to analyzing whether Nissán's appeal to the use of a 'partial truth' method strengthens or weakens the overall impact of her novels.

A brief consideration of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia*, one of the testimonial texts to have exercised significant influence on Latin American Studies in the 1980's and 1990's, will help to focus this analysis. Rigoberta Menchú's story of the social injustices borne by the indigenous Guatemalans, dictated to Elizabeth Regis-Debray in Paris in the early 1980s, quickly spread around the world and was soon adopted by many different universities for use in their curriculum. It raised awareness, inspired the formation of solidarity groups, has been credited with initiating the peace talks that helped bring an end to guerrilla warfare, and ultimately helped Menchú to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. The story stood virtually unquestioned, at least publicly, until one anthropologist, David Stoll, began to cast doubts about its veracity. His book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans* helps the reader to look at Menchú's testimony in a more critical light:

What if much of Rigoberta's story is not true? This is an awkward question, especially for someone like myself who thinks the Nobel award was a good idea. Still, I decided that it must be asked. While interviewing survivors of political violence in the late 1980s, I began to come across significant problems in the life story she told at the start of her career.

There is no doubt about the most important points: that a dictatorship massacred thousands of indigenous peasants, that the victims included half of Rigoberta's immediate family, that she fled to Mexico to save her life,

and that she joined a revolutionary movement to liberate her country. On these points, Rigoberta's account is beyond challenge and deserves the attention it receives. But in other respects, such as the situation of her family and village before the war, other survivors gave me a rather different picture, which is borne out by the available records. (Stoll 1999, viii)

Following the basic outline he established in this paragraph in his preface, Stoll was able to bring to the reader's attention several discrepancies between what Menchú stated in her testimonial account and what other eyewitnesses and records claim. Since the publication of Stoll's study, Rigoberta Menchú has publicly acknowledged that some of his points are justified; in particular she admitted to having attended some years of formal schooling. Still, perhaps the greatest effect the publication of *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* has generated is an increase in the general level of skepticism towards Rigoberta's testimony. However, as a final note, it is imperious to mention that as Arturo Arias' *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (2001) has demonstrated, David Stoll and his own methodology are not immune to debate or criticism either.

Is Nissán's fiction vulnerable in the same way, we may ask? While carrying out research in Mexico City, I had occasion to interview Rosa Nissán. During this meeting she was asked: 'Why did you fictionalize parts of your life story in *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*? Why not simply leave things as they were and publish an autobiography?' (IRN1). Nissán's response was simple but revealing:

No quería escribir una autobiografía. No era mi intención. [...] Además si yo hubiera escrito una autobiografía tendría que incluir más. Yo hice una novela para darme a mí misma más libertad. No quiero hacer nada que alguien tenga que comprobarme. Nadie me puede decir, ¿por qué dijiste que... ? No se tiene que apegar. [...] Tampoco puedo decir: ‘Nada de allí es mío. Hay cosas que yo he vivido allí, pero no todas’. (IRN1)

Rosa Nissán’s explanation that she did not create an autobiography because, had she done so, it would have also been necessary for her to have included more and also to have been able to prove that what she had written was true is of great significance. (Here the words ‘true’ and ‘truth’ are to be understood as synonymous to an actual historical occurrence as experienced by the author.) However, by stating that, while there is some fictionalization, the novel itself is not completely fictional she has persuaded the reader to believe what she had written, at least partially. This could be viewed as a way of having one’s cake and eating it too, because Nissán is able to write about her life, call it autobiographical, but, at the same time, alter the narration wherever she pleases. During the same interview, when pressed to reveal what elements had been totally invented and which ones corresponded to her autobiography, Nissán was reluctant to give a precise answer: ‘No sé, ya no me acuerdo’ (IRN1). Instead, she offered an example of one of the ways she modified the novel to *fit* her own life: ‘Al principio había puesto que tenía²⁶ dos hijos, pero luego lo subí a cuatro para que mis otros hijos no se sintieran’ (IRN1). Here Nissán demonstrates that life narratives offer facts but not factual history (Smith and

Watson 2001, 10). A tenet that Smith and Watson identify as one of characteristics of the literary works in which authors write about their own life. This apparently contradictory configuration – this is not an autobiography, but it is not all fiction either – along with Nissán's unwillingness to define what is historical fact and what is literary creation actually works in Nissán's favor. This is because it can create what this thesis calls 'a state of general belief'. What is meant by this is that when faced with a dilemma in which the reader is told that most of a narration is based on historical occurrences (with the exception of a small fictional element), but is not able to identify specifically what parts did not actually occur, the reader can be persuaded generally to accept the whole of the narration as real, even though it would not hold up in a court of law, for example. Here one encounters the principal strength and, simultaneously, the greatest weakness of Nissán's narrative strategy.²⁷

There are however, possible reactions other than that of general belief. The extreme skeptic could recognize the author's ploy and throw out any consideration of the novel's truthfulness due to the use of this tactic. Others could take the approach described by Sidonie Smith that challenges both a speaking subject and the belief in language's ability to be transparent by accepting that: 'The autobiographical text becomes a narrative artifice, privileging a presence, or identity, that does not exist outside language. [...] As one critic would argue, "no autobiography can take place except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text' (Smith 1987, 5). Still others, possibly the less careful readers, may disregard the references to partial fictionalization and accept everything in the text as truth because it is generally based on a real life. The narrative's strength is that it could be taken as

generally true, and its weakness is that a generally true account loses some of the sheer power wielded by a text claiming to be one-hundred percent true to life. How does this relate to Rigoberta Menchú? We may speculate that, had the Nobel laureate used Nissán's method when creating her novels, it is quite likely that her texts would have lost some of their persuasive force.

Since Nissán has previously classified herself as an author who has written from the margins of society, her narrative strategy can be viewed as an example of subaltern agency. On her own admission, her novel is a mixture of historical reality and fiction. At the same time she retains the details as to what is fact and what is not. As mentioned above, this control over the information could persuade the reader into the position of either generally accepting the whole text, or refusing to participate in a situation in which s/he is clearly disadvantaged. Nonetheless, this tactic of mixing verifiable personal history with fiction can be a double-edged sword that could weaken a potentially strong text or strengthen a weaker one, while at the same time allowing the subaltern author to reduce his personal commitment to his texts' contents.

Subaltern authors are not alone in their use of this technique when creating testimonial/biographical literature. One of the first Latin American creators of the contemporary 'testimonio', Miguel Barnet, also employed this tactic.

Ahora, en cuanto a la gestión de todas mis obras testimoniales, en mis novelas testimoniales, yo siempre aclaro que no hago testimonio puro, que no llevo directamente de la grabadora al papel el documento, lo factual, que yo lo elaboro a mi modo en complicidad con mi informante. Esa

complicidad, o esa simbiosis no la puedo revelar. Ése es un secreto que me confisco para mí y que no se lo voy a otorgar a nadie [...] (Azougarh 1996, 212)²⁸

Here is the same methodology in practice. Miguel Barnet has explained in his preface that *Biografía de un Cimarrón* is a book that is based on a series of conversations with his close friend Esteban Montejo and that what we are about to find is a written record of those exchanges. Nowhere in the original introduction does Barnet make mention of his artistry within the novels at that time. He clarifies this detail at a later date. Unaware of Barnet's additions to the text, the reader is led to believe that what he is reading is a transcription of Montejo's life. Should he become aware of Barnet's invention, then a situation similar to that presented by Nissán's novels would emerge. Either way, by using the tactics described thus far, these authors apply what could be described as a protective coating of belief to their document, effectively 'inoculating' the text against any potential deconstruction by an academic like David Stoll.

Another writer, much closer to Rosa Nissán's world, who has inoculated at least one of her major testimonial texts in this fashion is Elena Poniatowska. A brief consideration of her own narrative strategy will be quite beneficial in explaining her student's work. In repeated interviews she has given and articles she has published on her major work *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, she also seduces the reader into 'a state of general belief'. In her article published in *Vuelta*, 'Hasta no verte Jesús mío' (1978), she went to great lengths to show how she established a relationship of trust with Jesusa Palancares, asked permission to interview her, recorded (first with a tape-recorder and then by hand)

details about her life and then published them, all of which allege to link Jesusa's story to a concrete reality. However, she dashes the readers hopes of a solid connection by anticipating Jesusa's reaction to the book²⁹: 'Utilicé las anécdotas, las ideas y muchos de los modismos de Jesusa Palancares pero no podría afirmar que el relato es una transcripción directa de su vida porque ella misma lo rechazaría' (Poniatowska 1978, 10). To which Elena Poniatowska added: 'Maté a los personajes que me sobraban, eliminé cuanta sesión espiritualista pude, elaboré donde me pareció necesario, podé, cosí, emendé, inventé' (Poniatowska 1978, 10). On another occasion she repeated the same experience, emphasizing the narrative's factuality by showing how the book was composed using their interviews and explaining how she would verify the information she wrote down with Jesusa, but soon after undermining the factual element of the book by recalling Jesusa's personal rejection of the text:

El libro ella lo rechaza, no le gusta. Se lo llevé en hojas la primera vez [...] y me dijo: 'No me dé eso, quíteme esa chingadera de ahí que nada más me estorba'. Me dijo que no lo iba a leer. [...] le pidió a su hijo que se lo leyera, y cuando lo leyó me dijo: 'Usted inventa todo, son puras mentiras, no entendió nada, las cosas no son así'. Y tenía razón porque realmente ella no me dictó el libro así en la oreja y yo no más escribí sino que traté de darle capítulos, darle una secuencia, hacer un libro.

(Poniatowska 1985, 160)

It would appear that Poniatowska has purposefully created this mixture of fact and fiction in of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. When interviewed in the Summer of 2002 and asked specifically which parts of that particular novel she had invented, she avoided the question by pointing instead to the links between her text and the actual conversations between her informant Josefina Bórquez and herself:

N.G. En su novela, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, ¿por qué mezcla la ficción y la entrevista?

E.P. No, yo entrevisto a la Jesusa, y si usted lee las entrevistas, es sorprendente a veces la fidelidad entre la voz de la Jesusa y lo que se publica en el libro. Eso ya lo ha dicho Cynthia Steele, ¿no? Si yo hubiera publicado sólo las larguísimas conversaciones con la Jesusa, el libro se le hubiera caído al lector de las manos. ¿Por qué?, porque como nosotros, a veces somos un ‘pain in the neck’ como se dice en inglés. [...] [La Jesusa] se repetía, y era monótona, y era cansado. Entonces, con lo mejor que ella me decía decidí hacer una novela ¿no? Porque yo quería hacer el relato de su vida ¿no? (IEP)³⁰

Observing Poniatowska’s own use of this particular narrative strategy is helpful in understanding her protégée’s own writings. Poniatowska’s comments above seem to mirror those made by Nissán gave earlier in this chapter; creating tension between reality and imagination is vital to her text because, while the author can hide behind the principle that in any narrative reconstruction of the past, fact and fiction will tend to merge, her

text benefits from a general aura of authenticity while remaining immune to charges of inventive manipulation and distortion. The writer continues to maintain the upper hand in the power struggle by enveloping the subaltern's voice in his/her own creations.

Though Nissán has never used words to the effect of: 'The reason I mix personal history and fiction is because, while not having to account for everything in my novels, they can still be generally accepted as true to life stories', it would seem as though she has learned this (or at least learned to imitate this) from her mentor(s). It is also through this imitation that some of the subalternness in Nissán's texts is able to take shape. This becomes visible when one considers the different ways in which Nissán's texts mimic that of her mentor Elena Poniatowska. Mimicry can, indeed, be related to subalternity:

When colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to 'mimic' the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a 'blurred copy' of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. This is because mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. (Ashcroft 2002, 139)

If one takes this definition and applies the idea of colonizer and colonized to the teacher and student relationship between Poniatowska and Nissán, then it is possible to understand Nissán's work in a new light. While there are obvious differences between the two novels, the similarities are noteworthy. Both texts are narrated in the first person by female narrators who are telling their own life story. These two women are also unique

individuals from the marginal classes of Mexican society. During the course of the narration, Jesusa Palancares and Oshinica start life in a family setting (albeit in different circumstances, economic and otherwise), marry, and have children (adopted in one case, natural in the other). Later, both are separated from their husbands³¹ (by death or divorce) and abandoned by their children. As *Hisho que te nazca* and *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* conclude, the two protagonists carry on a somewhat solitary and subaltern existence in the Mexican capital. Granted, there are major differences in the two characters. (Though at times those differences can also be seen as similarities: i.e. one is a Jew and the other an ‘espiritista’ – two of the marginal religions found in a country dominated by Catholicism.) Both women come from different generations. Jesusa is poor, whilst Oshinica comes from a fairly affluent background. Oshinica has a large extended family and Jesusa is orphaned and has practically no extended family left after the end the Mexican Revolution. Notwithstanding these differences the novels share some basic themes: subaltern existence in the Mexican capital, resistance to domination (especially male), abandonment, solitude, and the struggle to achieve success in the commercial world.

In some respects, while Nissán does not openly mock Poniatowska in her mimicry of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, her novels’ imperfections help strengthen the case that her novels truly express a subaltern structure of feeling. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the majority of the negative criticism directed at Nissán’s work relates to its structural imperfections. Thus Eduardo Mejía’s article, reviewed earlier in the chapter, which mentions specific examples of *Novia que te vea*’s flaws (typographic errors, weakness in narrative structure, and general lack of originality). One of the most obvious

examples of the differences between the two novels is that, Poniatowska's narrative is much more fluid: in *Hisho que te nazca*, and especially in *Novia que te vea*, many of the 'seams' are much more visible. *Hasta no verte Jesus mío* is dominated by a picaresque woman (Jesusa Palancares) who tells us her life story almost entirely through a series of anecdotes, whereas Rosa Nissán's narrator uses not only anecdotes but also inner monologues, commentaries, and diary entries to tell her life story.³² The result of Nissán's mixing technique is that her texts have a *sac à chiffons* feel to them as we realize that they have been constructed from many different pieces that have been more visibly pulled together, whereas Poniatowska has created a life story that follows the same basic narrative scheme throughout. The roughness encountered in Nissán's novels aid in creating the blurred copy effect common to texts that mimic others.

Possibly one of the best examples of the rawness that can be seen in Nissán's first two novels also involves the use of Judeo-Spanish. In Oshinica's description of her family members she explained that her father and his parents were from Palestine (Israel) and spoke Persian (Nissán NTV, 46) whereas her mother and her side of the family were from Turkey and spoke Ladino. The protagonist made the cultural and linguistic divisions between the two families even clearer in *Hisho que te nazca*: 'Por mi madre es que yo amo esta *lingua*, no es por mi padre, en casa de mi abuelita se habla en persa, si mi pa habla de este modo es por contagio de su *musher*, de su *familya*, de la comunidad y porque es una lengua dulce como la miel' (Nissán HTN, 275). It is clear that the only member of Oshinica's family not on her mother's side who can use Ladino is her father. This was due to the influence his wife had on him. However, on several occasion in *Novia que te vea* Oshinica's paternal grandparents use Ladino in their conversations. This

is particularly true with regard to the (paternal) grandfather. In fact, one of the longest conversations recorded in Ladino in the first novel was one in which the paternal grandfather is speaking with a doctor (Nissán NTV, 23-24). Another lengthy passage in Ladino occurs when Oshinica's paternal grandmother described her family's journey from the Old World to Mexico (Nissán NTV, 80-81). These examples, and several other occasions when characters who were not supposed to speak Ladino do so, led me to question Nissán personally as to why these people spoke that language in her novels. When asked that particular question Rosa Nissán had not even realized this inconsistency. Her reply is worth noting: '¡Qué horror! No me fijé. Si pudiera lo cambiaría. [...] Bueno, lo que pasa es que en ese tiempo quería poner a todo el mundo a hablar Ladino. Simplemente me estaba divirtiendo, escribiendo en Ladino' (IRN3).

These differences could be attributed, though, to the dissimilar factors surrounding their creation. *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* was the product of a series of interviews and conversations between an experienced journalist and a woman from the Mexican provinces. Nissán's novels were the first fruits of an aspiring writer that were created bit by bit in a literary workshop and gradually drawn together into a novel over a fairly lengthy period of time. While no book is created in a day, and all imply a process of writing sections to be brought together at a later stage. The process of textual interweaving is more apparent in Nissán's novel which is more fragmentary, with smaller individual components, and showing greater diversity of style. Much of Nissán's mimicry and blurring effects is to be located in the interweaving of these varied pieces.

Rosa Nissán has created two texts that diverge radically from the norm found in the canon in Mexico's contemporary letters. The reader encounters a small sub-world in

Mexico City filled with immigrants, Ladino, Hebrew, Arabic, and the Talmud, along with Jewish customs and law. An unique aspect of one of the most unique aspects of her novels is her use of Judeo-Spanish. The incorporation of this type of language is important because, in addition to its linguistic value, it can be viewed as the verifiable voice of the subaltern. In Nissán's case, this rare sample of language has been authenticated by herself and outside authorities giving the reader more assurance that they are hearing the voice of the subaltern in this author's work. Though arguably from the same socioeconomic class as her fellow writers in 'El grupo', Nissán's religious and educational background is very different that most of her fellow classmates. However, this places her in a unique advantage when writing about the marginal in Mexico. Nissán has said that she is from that same world she recreates as the setting for the characters of her first two novels, thus speaking from within this environment is second nature to her. As briefly mentioned previously, perhaps one of the unique elements that sets these subalterns apart from the other marginal sectors of Mexico is the fact that they withdraw themselves from the mainstream of Mexican society. They are subalterns who, to a certain degree, choose to be so.

Aside from learning about the challenges that come from being a woman in a community that marginalizes womanhood, Nissán also offers an excellent lesson on subaltern agency and mimicry. Employing a skill used by her mentor, Elena Poniatowska, Nissán offers each reader a dilemma by explaining that, in both her novels *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*, she has mixed fact with fiction. This combination has enabled her to effectively inoculate her narrative against assaults on its authenticity whilst still appealing to some form of truthfulness. Nonetheless, Nissán has

the upper hand in this situation because it is she alone who knows which elements are fictional and which denote fact. Unless she is willing to reveal that information to us, then we as the readers will have to choose between discrediting her whole account because we do not have the key to distinguish between fact and fiction, or generally believing her account because it is mostly based on a verifiable reality.

Though Nissán used this technique it does not necessarily find its origins in subaltern theory. Nissán's mentor, Poniatowska, has also employed it with her testimonial writing and it appears that Nissán has borrowed this technique from her teacher. As seen in this chapter, a comparison of Nissán's first two novels and Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* reveals several similarities between these two writers. This mimicking could also be arguably one of the factors that strengthen the case that the subaltern *does* speak in this Jewish author's novels. If one examines Rosa Nissán's writing career closely it is possible to see that one of the keys that has allowed Nissán to publish has been based on her ability to simulate the dominant trends in writing. She needed to join a writers' workshop, in which she was quite different from the other members in various ways and it was there that she learned the techniques associated with the 'testimonio'. By becoming a part of a hegemonic group she was able to learn the patterns needed to create a piece of work that would be accepted for publication and she came into contact with the individuals who were able to help her get her work into print.

One of the greatest ironies in Nissán's writing is that in learning how to write and obtaining the abilities that would enable the subaltern to tell her story, she also effectively learned to erase at least some of the subalternity from her texts. Rosa Nissán is effectively

a subaltern from one of the unique marginal groups of Mexico: those who have been excluded (and excluded themselves) from the cultural center due to their religion and customs. She teaches the reader that, in acquiring the skills needed to give voice to the subaltern, she has also eliminated its tracks. By using a technique that protects a narrative against attacks on its veracity, Nissán has also softened her novel's impact by not allowing her reader to know what is linked to historical occurrence and what corresponds to imagination. What results is effectively a narrative that encapsulates the subaltern but that at the same time attempts to hide its exact location.

¹ Another critic who also offers a negative viewpoint of Nissán's work is Luis Bernardo Pérez in 'La novia rebelde' (1992) and his second article, '*Novia que te vea*' (1994). In the 1992 article Perez states that he believes the novel *Novia que te vea* is too 'telenoveler', but later, found himself recommending the movie based on the same. However, he does not do this without first warning the reader that '*Novia que te vea* es, en resumen, un trabajo un tanto disparateo [...]'.

² Other articles that have spoken positively of Nissán and her works include '*Novia que te vea* de Rosa Nissán' by Vincente Quirarte (1992) that describes the story in the following manner: 'la historia de una educación sentimental, donde el mundo es profesor incipiente y la sed de la alumna, ejecutante apasionada del instrumento músico'. Patricia Rosales y Zamora characterizes Nissán's second novel as 'una intensa, viva y honda narración que como ella, absorbe y captura' in her article, 'Importante momento de la literatura femenina' (1996, 9-b). Shortly after that article was published another in *Excelsior*'s 'sección cultural' stated: 'Acaba de aparecer el excelente libro de Rosa Nissán *Hisho que te nazca*, continuación de la novela *Novia que te vea*, ambas obras bien escritas y ágiles revelan el mundo y las costumbres de la comunidad sefardita emigrada a México' (Anonymous, 1996).

³ Two specific articles that I was unable to access are: 'Identidad mexicana y sefardita en la obra de Rosa Nissán' (Martínez 2001-2002, 82-93) and 'Género y etnicidad: Los textos autobiográficos de Rosa Nissán' (Scott 1999, 18-25).

⁴ Two possible exceptions to this statement that deserves mention here. Margo Glantz's *Genealogías* (1981) is more a biography of her father than an autobiography and it focuses on the Yiddish community in Mexico City instead of the Sephardic as Nissán does. The other is Sabina Berman's *La bobbe*, a series of vignettes that cover a period of about twenty years and supposedly narrated by a young girl (though at times the narrator's mature mode of expression makes this difficult to accept entirely).

⁵ The most recent population figures quoted were extracted from Mexico's census taken in 2000. This information is available through the web page www.inegi.gob.mx (last consulted Jan. 2004)

⁶ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2002, 'Mexico', p. 179.

⁷ There are many examples of this. The fact the Mexico is anti-abortion and anti-capital punishment is without doubt linked to Catholic doctrine. There has never been a non-Christian president of Mexico. The celebration of Holy week every spring on a national level and other Catholic holidays are other examples of the ways in which Catholicism dominates everyday life.

⁸ Nissán brings out a fine example of this in her second novel *Hisho que te nazca*: 'De soltera no me dejaron ir a Israel, pero a él [el hermano de la protagonista] nadie lo detuvo. [...] Ahí lo conocen por El mexicano y le gritaron: "¡Eh, tú, Mécsico!", y aquí en Mexico le dicen judío' (pp. 105-06). This is just one example of the Mexican Jews' failure to identify with one side.

⁹ Another critic and academic who has spoken about some Mexican Jews belonging to the margin is Mexican Jewish writer Ilan Stavans: 'I wanted to identify with those who spoke Spanish, yet I couldn't,

simply because the whiteness of my skin made me different among the bronze and brown. At the same time, as a Jew, I had always been a marginal citizen in Mexico, which means, I guess, that I knew very well my way around any alien nation. I simultaneously mistrusted the Other and was mistrusted as the Other' (Stavans 1995, 194-95).

¹⁰ Interesting enough, in the same interview previously referred to in the text, Rosa Nissán described her latest novel as 'mexicana' (as opposed to Jewish). When asked to clarify what she meant by this statement she said: 'Ya mi protagonista es una mujer propiamente 'mexicana', no es judía, vive en un mundo normal y sus amigas son mexicanas también' (IRN1). Perhaps, one of the ironies of this statement is that all her previous protagonists have been Mexican. They were all born in Mexico and have all been Mexican citizens. What is highlighted here is the fact, that being Mexican is not always a matter of place of birth but rather is determined by cultural influences.

¹¹ The reader will recall from previous chapters that Hugo Hiriart was one of the literary teachers who formed the writer's workshop considered in this thesis as well as being one of Silvia Molina's key mentors. He was highly instrumental in the publication of Molina's first novel.

¹² One critical article that compares and contrasts *Novia que te vea* in both novel and film form is 'Memoria, *midrash*, y metamorfosis en *Novia que te vea* de Guita Schyfter: un diálogo texto-visual' (Mennell 2000, 50-63). Mennell's exploratory critique illuminates the strict relationship between the book and the movie, the ways in which the movie expands upon the novel, and the Jewish symbolism found in both.

¹³ A further definition of the term 'costumbrismo' has been given by Balderston in the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Latin American and Caribbean Cultures*: 'the description of ordinary life in a particular milieu, especially of provincial regional or rural life' (Balderston 2000, 414).

¹⁴ At this point it becomes important to clarify to the reader that while some academics and speakers of the language in question use the words Judeo-Spanish and Ladino interchangeably, others distinguish between the two, claiming that Ladino is Judeo-Spanish written with Hebrew characters and syntax (as occurred in some texts written in Turkey) and Judeo-Spanish is simply the language in spoken form and when transliterated into a Latin-based language.

¹⁵ From this point onward in the text, the acronym 'IRN2' will be used to refer to: Nathaniel Gardner, 'Interview with Rosa Nissán', 19 February, 2003.

¹⁶ From this point onward in the text, the acronym 'IRN3' will be used to refer to: Nathaniel Gardner, 'Interview with Rosa Nissán', 17 March, 2003.

¹⁷ However this point could be dismissed to a certain extent if one takes into account the following explanation: 'Como el judeo-español carece de una tradición de enseñanza formal (escuela) no existen gramáticas, no existen academias de lengua; se habla como se puede, la escritura no está fijada y se utiliza la ortografía del francés o el italiano para la escritura [...]' (Revah and Enríquez 1998, 97). One could argue that since there is no formally accepted norm for this language, Nissán's spelling could also be deemed acceptable.

¹⁸ At this point the reader should note that, for reasons of practicality, this study is not meant to be exhaustive in its limits. Also, instead of the customary year of publication to identify the work in question this thesis will use 'NTV' to signify *Novia que te vea* and 'HTN' for *Hisho que te nazca* in all future citations (since the 1996 edition of *Novia que te vea* is used and *Hisho que te nazca* was first published in 1996).

¹⁹ This is not to be considered a strange occurrence for two reasons. Firstly, due to the lack of formal education in Judeo-Spanish, at this point any imposition of a 'standard' or norm with respect to spelling could be considered quite subjective. Secondly, due to the fact that Rosa Nissán spelt Ladino phonetically, the vocabulary found in her novels would be more likely to vary.

²⁰ Rosa Nissán created these glossaries herself with the help of her mother: 'Los glosarios, los hice como se dice aquí en México "al abentón". Son las palabras que se usan al diario en mi casa. Cualquier cosa que no sabía se lo preguntaba a mi mamá' (Nathaniel Gardner, 'Interview with Rosa Nissán', 17 March, 2003).

²¹ As a means of clarification for the reader, it is important to know that Rosa Nissán brought out *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* with different publishing houses (Plaza & Janés and Planeta de México respectively). In the case of the first novel, it was decided not to italicize Judeo-Spanish words; however, those who printed *Hisho que te nazca* did do so. There might seem to be an inconsistency in the use of italics with respect to the Ladino that appears in the quotes in this chapter. Nonetheless, I have simply chosen to preserve the original style found in each of the two novels.

²² One relatively insignificant exception to this are the conversations Moshón is said to have with his father about money and the family business. However Oshinica is specifically excluded from these intimacies. (Nissán NTV, 125)

²³ The only exception to this would be one incident when some of her classmates became angry with her and some of them accused her of being a Jew. (Nissán 1996, 10)

²⁴ The novel *Hisho que te nazca* (1996a) is divided into three sections.

²⁵ This is an example of another proverb (which as stated earlier is a common element found in Sephardic speech) which employs an Old Testament biblical metaphor. Thus, it can be seen as a saying with a religious origin as well.

²⁶ Note that she refers to Oshinica as she would to herself in this quote (and others as well).

²⁷ Recent critics have noted that 'novelists are bound only by the reader's expectation of internal consistency in the world of veridimilitude created within the novel. They are not bound by rules of evidence that link the world of the narrative with a historical world outside the narrative. In contrast, life narrators [a term developed by the authors which is similar to the one commonly used for autobiographers] inevitably refer to the world beyond the text, the world that is the ground of the narrator's lived experience even if that ground is comprised in part of cultural myths, dreams, fantasies, and subjective memories' (Smith and Watson 2001, 9). Nissán takes advantage of this structure to create her narrative puzzles for her readers.

²⁸ The reader familiar with *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia*, will notice the surprising similarity between Barnet's comments with regards to his 'personal touch' to the 'testimonios' he publishes and Rigoberta Menchú and her secrets: 'Claro, aquí, en toda mi narración yo creo que doy una imagen de eso [mi pueblo]. Pero, sin embargo, todavía sigo ocultando mi identidad como indígena. Sigo ocultando lo que yo considero que nadie lo sabe, ni siquiera un antropólogo, ni un intelectual, por más que tenga muchos libros, no saben distinguir todos nuestros secretos' (Burgos-Debray 1984, 377).

²⁹ It is important to note here that Josefina Bórquez (the real life person on which Jesusa Palancares is based) never read Poniatowska's book in its entirety due to the fact that she was illiterate.

³⁰ Cynthia Steele has confirmed that *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* does indeed follow Poniatowska's transcripts closely: 'During September 1988 and April and May 1989 Elena Poniatowska gave me [Steele] access to transcriptions of some of her interviews with Bórquez, the first of which is dated March 4, 1964, as well as several early and late drafts of the novel. [...] What these materials reveal is that, in the novel, Poniatowska was remarkably faithful to her informant's story and language' (Steele 1992, 34).

³¹ In Jesusa Palancares' case her husband had died before she adopted children.

³² To cite some brief examples (which by no means are meant to be exhaustive) one should refer to the account of Oshinica finding and reading her mother's secret stash of romance novels on page 57 of *Novia que te vea*, different inner monologues the protagonist shares with the reader are found on pages 109 and 117, one can find commentary on Jewish life on page 31 of *Hisho que te nazca*, a diary entry is found on page 25 in *Novia que te vea*, and there is even a recipe on page 20 of *Hisho que te nazca*.

Conclusion

During the course of this thesis one of the driving questions has been to examine whether or not the subaltern speaks in the works of the three writers analyzed and then to assess the implications the answer to this question has on the study of the texts considered. The research undertaken resulted in various findings. It became clear that, if one were to view the subaltern in purist Spivakian terms, then the subaltern does not speak because, as inferred from the important essay ‘Can the Subaltern speak?’, due to the present construction of the current institutions of hegemony, one of the defining features of this group is their inability to be known: their ‘identity of difference’. Therefore, in a purist sense, the authors in question are not able to represent the subaltern.

However, if one were to open up the debate with regard to who or what is subaltern and return to Guha’s proposition of drawing lines between ‘the people’ and ‘the élite’, then one encounters terms that make a study of the subaltern much more feasible. So, bearing these statements in mind, this thesis has chosen to consider the subaltern in terms of the marginal rather than the irrecoverable so as to be able to study subaltern reality using what Spivak has called a ‘strategic essentialism’. These case studies have been able to demonstrate that, rather than an all-or-nothing situation in which the subaltern either speaks or does not, it would be more accurate to consider the degree of representation in terms of a descending scale. The level at which the subaltern is represented appears to be subject to a number of factors that should be considered when analyzing each author and text.

With regard to Elena Poniatowska, we have noted that, shortly after she began working with the anthropologist Oscar Lewis she focused her attention on the more marginal members of Mexican society. Her success with *Hasta no verte Jesus mío* and other publications permitted her the opportunity to teach her new-found skills to new writers during her time with 'El grupo'. One of the principles some of her students claim to have learned from her was a sincere interest in: 'escarbar en el ser humano' (ISM). This is a tenet Poniatowska herself appears to have employed in much of her own literature.

Much like Oscar Lewis, when Poniatowska has written on the subaltern she has attempted to research her subject thoroughly. In the case of *Hasta no verte Jesus mío* and *Gaby Brimmer* that meant spending time with her subjects of study, interviewing them, listening to them. In Josefina Bórquez's case Poniatowska spent at least one afternoon per week for many months before actually having adequate information to write the novel that was based on her life. Aside from this, Poniatowska's first-hand research has also entailed other elements such as attending 'espiritismo' meetings and learning more about the realities of cerebral palsy in Mexico.

Nonetheless, as demonstrated in *Querido Diego, te abraza Queila*, Poniatowska did use written sources as well. This particular case helps to demonstrate that this author has not always been interested in attempting to depict a subaltern subject's reality from a solely historical vantage point. Though Poniatowska had personally interviewed Diego Rivera and based her story line on the historical document written by Wolfe, Poniatowska used this particular narrative in order to express her own personal agenda. She has confirmed this idea in interviews published after the novella came out. So, at times, it

appears that while Poniatowska does seek to represent some historical realities, she also has employed this narrative when she had an ax to grind as well.

Of Poniatowska's texts that have been considered in this thesis, the one that most appears to allow the subaltern to speak to the greatest degree is *Gaby Brimmer*. There are several reasons for this asseveration. Interestingly enough, this book is the one that is most similar to the Oscar Lewis model. Poniatowska spliced several different voices to represent one single family from different points of reference. However, this was not an anonymous or protected protagonist whose identity is not known until much later (often posthumously) like others have been in the past. Poniatowska's account differs from Lewis' in that her 'testimonio' incorporated its main subject as the co-author of the work in question, and included pictures and other personal details. Another way in which *Gaby Brimmer* is distinct from other 'testimonios' Poniatowska has published is that the different voices are very clearly defined, thereby allowing the reader a clearer view of the voice they are receiving. Another unique feature of this text is that, in linking Gaby Brimmer to the 'Onda' literary movement, she also suggests how the subaltern voice can fit into larger literary movements.

Though possibly Poniatowska's most prolific and successful former student (if only in terms of publication), Silvia Molina emerges from this study as the writer whose works are least able to represent the subaltern 'authentically'. None the less, the way in which she did represent subalternity indicates that she is aware (either consciously or not) of a set of academic theories about the marginal classes. This could be due to the fact that she is the only one of the three to have formally studied anthropology. The distance found in Molina's fiction between narrator and the subaltern and the different protagonists in

her texts, indicates a different approach to the subaltern. In both of her novels and the short story analyzed in this thesis the subaltern figures appear to be ‘observed’ from the outside. When incorporated into the narrative, their participation is different from that of the other characters, the narrator approaches them differently and this results in a ghostly portrayal of these figures within Molina’s fiction. More often than not, many of the subalterns are referred to or seen within the narrative but they have no real ‘subjective’ voice. On the rare occasions when they do speak their thoughts are never disclosed to the reader. (One of the best examples of this is *Ascensión Tun*’s Consuelo, whose thoughts, before becoming a subaltern figure, are made known to the reader, but once she begins to suffer from dementia the reader loses access to her inner thoughts.) The subaltern is, thus, routinely seen as somewhat enigmatic, even exotic, a subject of curiosity for the élite. Molina’s writings suggest knowledge of a selection of academic theories pertaining to the subaltern. She focuses on topics such as the hybrid in *El amor que me juraste* and promotes promoting the simple acceptance of the subaltern’s existence within every society. The fact that Molina has incorporated subaltern themes in her fiction shows not only awareness of their existence but also an acknowledgement of her hermeneutic limitations.

Rosa Nissán presents the most unique case of the three writers considered in this thesis because she is the only one who claims to have belonged to the margins of Mexican society. Here it would appear at first glance to be more of a cut-and-dried case with respect to whether the subaltern speaks in her fiction or not. Nevertheless, this thesis has probed different avenues of investigation in order to test Nissán’s claim of authenticity with regard to the portrayal of subalternity. The result of this analysis shows

that, both linguistically and culturally, Nissán's texts appear to create a legitimate image of subalternity. Whilst both *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* contain important cultural, linguistic, and historical information that readers have found fascinating, and a certain rawness is encountered in Nissán's fiction as well. Several critics have pointed to imperfections within Nissán's first two novels that simply do not exist on the same level, if at all, in either her mentor's or her ex-classmate's work. While not attempting to detract from many of the merits these highly unique and valuable novels possess, these narratives' *peccadilloes* also seem to indicate what occurs when the subaltern speaks unaided, as it were.

Thus, though Poniatowska, Molina, and Nissán have written on the subaltern, all three seem to approach this social group differently. The type of subaltern that became the subject of the narrative varied from author to author, as did their experience. Both Molina and Nissán in effect tended to apply Poniatowska's idea of 'escabar en el ser humano' in different ways.

An important aspect of this study is the analysis it provides of the literary workshop, 'El grupo', which has illuminated the work of these three authors in a number of ways. Firstly, it has given a more precise contour to the role of the workshop in contemporary literary tradition in Mexico City. Indeed, Poniatowska, Molina, and Nissán are not unique in having taken their first steps in, or directing a literary workshop (or both). This appears to be a growing trend in the Mexican capital about which little is known. This thesis has attempted to fill in a portion of this critical gap in our understanding. Moreover, by carrying out a study of this workshop, one is able to analyze

its fruits (both in the form of writers and publications) in light of this new information and better understand the process leading from inspiration to training to novel.

Another contribution of this thesis concerns Latin American Subaltern Studies itself. In much of the literature written on the subaltern in Latin America there appears to be more of a focus on the poor (especially the urban poor), or indigenous populations. While not wishing to detract from an analysis of these groups (indeed, they are also important protagonists in this thesis) this study has proposed to open up the study of the subaltern to other marginal individuals. Though they vary in size and status, the study of these ‘other’ marginal sections of society within Mexico helps to widen the applicability of this field.

Finally, if one is to recognize that subaltern representation can be viewed in terms of degrees or levels – implying the recognition that some individuals are more subaltern than others - then it is possible to establish a dialogue with respect to subaltern speech, desire, consciousness, language, agency, and culture as well as analyzing different intensities of subalternity. Many of these different aspects have been touched upon in this thesis as well: Gaby Brimmer’s thoughts and desires, Jesusa’s interest in ‘el espiritismo’, Miguel’s insistence that the subaltern is everywhere, and Oshinica’s never-ending hope to ‘exit’ subalternity. All of the texts studied in this thesis reveal new fragments of the overall tapestry of the Mexican literary canon. The final result is an enriched understanding of these authors, their works, the forces that help to motivate them, and their contribution to Subaltern Studies and contemporary Latin American literature.

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